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AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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in this issue

ONE PROBLEM after another — interesting, challenging, difficult, joyful, painful — that's what life is all about. All fiction examines these problems, but science fiction has traditionally broken new boundaries, looking for answers we may be searching for in the future — or might have needed in other possible realities. Isn't this a crazy idea when we have so many problems right here and now in the present? Some think so, but for science fiction readers and writers, today isn't enough. We feel compelled to look beyond our noses — beyond the obvious — and wonder what basic truths would remain under a multitude of varying circumstances, and what solutions our alternate or future selves would find.

What would you do if you were suddenly transported to an alternate universe where sorcery was commonplace and you were destined to be one of its most powerful masters? Or how would you cope if you were a futuristic detective searching for a murderer on a satellite full of clones? What if you turned out to be exactly like your father for whom you felt nothing but hate? Imagine yourself in a colony of outcasts searching for reunion with humanity, or as a creature who seems to be the only one of its kind in the world. How would you go about writing the definitive book of knowledge in the year 2070; dealing with godhood in an undersea civilization; fixing the economy once and for all; or choosing between love and immortality?

All of these problems are dealt with by our collection of inventive writers in this issue. Problems of identity, violence, aberration, alienation and even inflation are examined through fantasy, tragedy, satire, adventure, comedy and romance. Writers Ellison, Zelazny, Goulart, Kilczer, Gotschalk, Pronzini, Malzberg, Russo, Sarrantonio and Moore have provided us with a panoramic pastiche of entertaining speculations on the human condition.

Our columnists continue the speculation: Robert Silverberg ponders publishers' hype; J. Ray Dettling postulates future wonders through fiber optics; and Melissa Mia Hall examines the wonder that is writer Gene Wolfe and what makes him tick.

Illustrators Gary Freeman, Alicia Austin and John Flynn enhance the fascinating ideas presented on our pages, and Ian Miller captures the world of what might be if the strange inner existence of our unconscious mind could be seen by the waking eye. Permission to reproduce an illustration from *Secret Art* by Ian Miller is given by Quick Fox, Inc., exclusive distributors of Dragon's Dream® Books in the United States. See our review of this intriguing publication on page seven.

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AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES



September, 1981

FOUNDED IN 1926 BY HUGO GERNSBACK

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opinion

Robert Silverberg

AMONG THE MANY sacred totems of the publishing industry is the notion that the names of authors are important commercial commodities — or, if not their names, then a blazoning of their achievements. ("Winner of the Golden Gizmo Award! Author of the best-selling LORD CHILBLAIN'S BIRDBATH!") You see the covers of magazines and the jackets of books festooned with this sort of credential-waving, in the hope of trapping some gullible readers.

Sometimes publishers go to marvelously imaginative extremes to provide credentials for their authors. This, if it sells five hundred extra copies and causes no cancelled subscriptions, is an okay ploy. But what is not an okay ploy? Suppose a magazine cover announces stories by Ellison, Silverberg, and Le Guin, and none of the three are to be found inside? That's happened, too — not quite so egregiously, and certainly always by accident, for covers are printed well ahead of the magazines they contain, and now and then a name has landed on a cover but the exigencies of makeup have squeezed that author's story out of the book. That's kosher if it happens once or twice, and I don't know any magazine that ever made a habit of doing it regularly. (When AMAZING's editor first asked me to do this column and we were haggling over my fee, I suggested that if we were unable to agree on terms I would simply rent the magazine my name at \$15 an issue, no column, just the name on the cover. I offered to get her Ellison, Asimov, and Niven on the same terms, and I suspect I could have done it.)

Which leads to some general considerations of truth-in-packaging in science fiction publishing. How much hanky-panky does go on, and how important is it? You have seen, I'm sure, scores of novels labeled HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER, with no footnotes on the cover to tell you whether it is the book or the author that has raked in the trophies. Robert Silverberg

happens to be a Hugo and Nebula Award Winner, and you can bet his publishers stick that line on his books — but if a reissue of a novel he wrote when he was still learning his trade, twenty-five years ago, is proclaimed HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER, is not some deception going on? Or does anyone pay any attention to such labels at all? (By now just about everybody who's been writing science fiction with any proficiency over a decade or more has won a Hugo or a Nebula or both, with a few glaring and shameful exceptions. So perhaps the label is self-obliterating by now, invisible to the readership, since it's on practically everything. And, considering some of the turkeys that have been honored with awards, maybe a better strategy for the 1980s would be to have your publisher splash NEVER WON ANY AWARD on the cover. A mark of class, so to speak.)

Still, even if the award gimmick is becoming worthless, are there any rules to which one must adhere? In 1969 or thereabouts a paperback publisher released a novel by Bob Shaw labeled HUGO AWARD WINNER. Now, Bob Shaw is the author of what may be the finest short story that never won an award, "Light of Other Days," but his fiction is yet to bring him a Hugo. When I pointed out to the paperback editor that neither Shaw nor his book had won a Hugo, the editor's amazed response was, "Really?" He seemed pretty sincere. But meanwhile there was the novel out there on the stands claiming Hugo status. Since nobody can keep track of who has won and who hasn't, there's nothing stopping any paperback house from calling half its books Hugo winners — something like Large Economy Size. There's nothing stopping an author from proclaiming himself EIGHT-TIME HUGO WINNER or TEN-TIME NEBULA WINNER or whatever, even if he's only won one or two. I've seen it done. I've seen people who have won Hugos for fanzine work or magazine editing attach those Hugos to their fiction. Why

not? It can't hurt sales, can it? And it just might help.

Whether such finaglement does help is something that only the market-research departments of the hotshot paperback companies might know, and I suspect they don't have any firm data either. Similarly with the selling value of names. Names have a certain recognition value in science fiction, sure, but — and here I nibble the feeding hand again — I wonder just how much. People tend to remember books. Everybody loved *Dune*, for example, including a few hundred thousand people who have never read any other science fiction and have no idea of the author's name. If they see a book on the stands bearing the byline, "Frank Herbert," they're just as apt to pass it by as pick it up — probably more so. But if it is prominently inscribed, BY THE AUTHOR OF *DUNE*, it might jar something in the memory banks. With the possible exception of Isaac Asimov, who has become a celebrity through classic celebrity channels, most of the big-selling sf writers became established as newsstand hits by virtue of having written one big book that stuck in the general consciousness — *The Martian Chronicles*, 2001, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Outside of the mysterious world of fandom people tend to remember books, not names.

So perhaps there's not really much point in festooning a magazine cover with Significant Names, legitimately or otherwise. (I'm still willing to rent out my name, however, if there's someone willing to buy.) Although it is a cherished assumption in publishing that names sell, and many authors including myself are paid accordingly, I have two bits of evidence that argue for the contrary. One is the November, 1953 issue of *Imagination*, a modest magazine of long ago that published a lot of modest stories at modest rates. For that one issue, the publisher commissioned a new story by Robert A. Heinlein and paid a staggering sum for it — \$250, I think. Naturally Heinlein was conspicuously featured on the cover. The magazine's sales that month, the publisher later claimed, actually took a slight dip — and that was the last time he forked out big bucks for big names.

A short while before, the September, 1953 issue of *Science Fiction Adventures* appeared, containing stories by people like Robert Sheckley and C.M. Kornbluth. They weren't listed on the cover. The cover

line — concocted with deliberate slyness by editor Harry Harrison — read, "IN THIS ISSUE: MOSKOWITZ — SNODGRASS — VAN LHIIN." Harrison swears that the Moskowitz - Snodgrass - Van-Lhin issue sold just as well (or as badly) as issues featuring such well-known folk as L. Sprague de Camp, Poul Anderson, and Damon Knight. And so it goes.

Both magazines, by the way, went out of business a year or two later.

Robert Silverberg

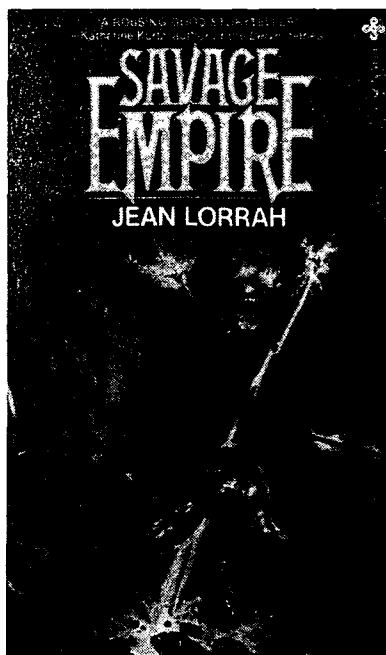
The Interstellar Connection

Book Reviews

Tom Stalcar

Savage Empire by Jean Lorrach. *Playboy Paperbacks*, \$2.25. Lorrach was the co-author of *First Channel* (*Playboy*, \$2.25) along with Jacqueline Lichtenberg, with whom she has shared an interest in *Star Trek* for a number of years. An alumnus of the active world of *Star Trek* fan writers, Jean Lorrach has gone off on her own with her first solo novel. *Savage Empire* presents the kind of clearly-defined sense of right versus wrong that we have come to associate with the Gene Roddenberry series. However, her world is original and her characters are entirely her own in *Savage Empire*.

"Readers" are people who can telepathically communicate with others and have access to their thoughts. The *Aventine Empire* is a civilization which boasts a number of Readers, developing their special talents in schools. Lenardo is a Master Reader who trained a young man named Galen who has since gone over to the side of the enemy and joined their ranks in a long-standing struggle against the



Aventine Empire. Thought to be savages by the Aventines, these people include Adepts who are capable of telekinesis but not telepathy. Adepts can thus blast an enemy with a rockslide or simply stop the actions of an enemy's heart. Readers and Adepts lose power as distance to the subjects increase, and are limited by energy drain after use of their talents.

Lenardo learns things about the savages as he journeys into their territory. Although years of fighting and cultural separation make it seem impossible, he comes to the conclusion that Adepts and Readers should join together. The results are graphically shown in a passage in which the Adept woman Aradia works with Lenardo to destroy a tumor in her father's brain. While Lenardo "Reads" the intricate outlines of the areas of the brain, Aradia concentrates on Adept surgery, all the while risking destruction of vital tissue by mistake.

Savage Empire is a fine first novel by a talented writer.

Lost Dorsai by Gordon R. Dickson. Ace SF, trade paperback, \$4.95. Illustrated by Fernando and including a good profile of Gordon R. Dickson by Sandra Miesel, *Lost*

Dorsai is a real treat for Dorsai fans and Dickson devotees. His famous life-work, the Childe Cycle, has added another future novel, continuing the writer's in-depth explorations of the meaning of being a soldier, war and peace, and the effects on individuals of being called upon to kill or be killed by an enemy.

Michael de Sandoval bears the ignominy of having completed his training as an officer of the Dorsai, only to abruptly walk away from his proud status and devote himself to pacifism and music. Aware of his training and conditioning, people are quick to avoid picking fights with Michael, while his mysterious status as a pacifist creates a feeling of alienation in him. His tortuous inner conflicts are the centerpiece for the novel's swirling melange of rebels, patriots, mercenaries, and combat strategies. Honor and duty are as important in a Dickson novel as life and death in a military maneuver. Tempted to help his comrades but unable to give up his non-violence, Michael must find a way to resolve his conflict as the novel's action draws to its peak.

A worthy addition to one of the most popular series in sf, *Lost Dorsai* also includes a Dorsai story called "Warrior," and an excerpt from the forthcoming work *The Final Encyclopedia*. Fernando's illustrations are well-integrated into the text of this deluxe Dickson package.

The Creation of Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Magazine Science Fiction by Paul A. Carter. Columbia University Press, trade paperback, \$6.95. This book traces the history of magazine sf from the Hugo Gernsback *Amazing Stories* era through the present. Using plot summaries and content analysis of key stories and exploring the themes present in the outstanding short fiction of the times, Carter presents a readable survey of the material. Those lurid, bug-eyed monster covers of the pulps often had worthwhile stories under them. Sf has always had much more idea content than comparable non-sf publications. Slavery versus freedom, the role of society, the status of women, the possible future of human evolution, and many other topics were routinely part of sf stories. During the same periods, however, mainstream pulps and slicks usually dealt with situations of passing interest. Very few of those forgettable tales could be anthologized today and

sold, while sf of the '30s onward is still valuable and readable for the most part.

Anyone interested in finding out where today's sf came from should read Carter's fine book.

Enemies of the System by Brian Aldiss. Avon, \$1.95. If mankind survives one million years into the future, what will life be like at that time? Brian Aldiss decided to extrapolate from the current trends of the world rivalry between communism and capitalism, creating a far future in which a new form of human — *Homo uniformis* — has replaced *Homo sapiens*. Genetic manipulation and microsurgery, along with a carefully controlled world economy and social system based upon communism, have totally replaced the incorrect thought-patterns, improper methods of reasoning, and faulty institutions such as the family, which the new theories of BioCom found so primitive.

This brief novel concerns a group of elite tourists who visit a planet which has not yet been transformed into a BioCom world. A technological breakdown and an accident involving the bus-like road vehicle carrying the tourists leave the people vulnerable to

the savage life-forms of the planet. They question the values they have been taught to believe in, as they view for the first time descendants of the capitalists whose spaceship crashed long ago. These survivors' offspring declined into animal behavior, although they survived against terrible challenges such as the fact that crops cannot grow without microorganisms which form a vital link in the food chain. They even have elaborate rituals dating back to their ancestors who fervently wished that their ship could take off again. Unfortunately for the elite tourists, the savages lock them up in a cell and the lofty arguments and theories of communism fall on deaf ears.

Aldiss used this novel to make a statement about the relative merits of capitalism and communism and their eventual effects upon creativity and survival ability. A little heavy on the speeches but thought-provoking nonetheless.

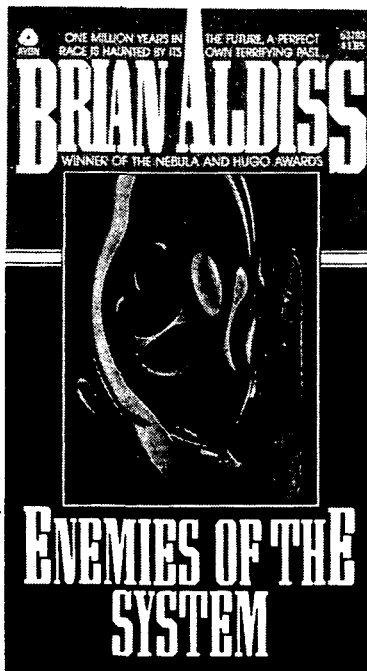
Late Entry:

Secret Art, by Ian Miller, verse by Barry King, published by Dragon's Dream,® \$9.95. 96 pages, full color throughout, large format paperback. See our cover for a sample of the fascinating illustrations in this publication. An incredible book of extremely unique and nightmarish visions by English illustrator Ian Miller whose work adorns books and book covers by authors such as Ray Bradbury, H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, Phillip K. Dick and Tolkien. (Film buffs will remember his work in Bakshi's *Wizards*.)

Roger Dean's introduction characterizes Miller's creations as something that "recalls distant troubled memories or disturbing dreams" — where "medieval armies and macabre behavior in Toyland" all conform to a "special sense of order" — "the demented doodlings of a possessed engineer."

The accompanying verse by sociologist/writer Barry King is particularly suited to these remarkable perspectives of the grotesque.

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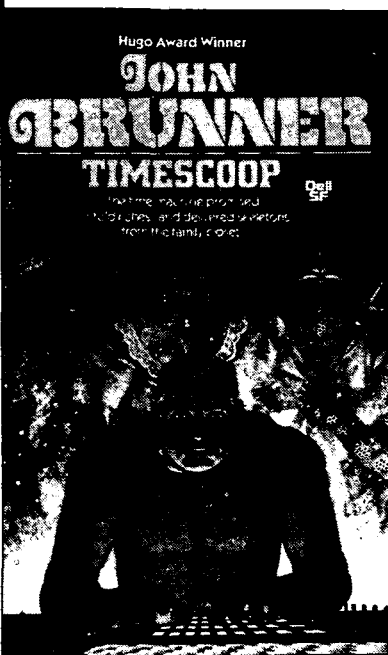
Satyrday by Steven Bauer. Berkley/Putnam hardcover, \$11.95; also an SF Book Club edition. Do you like fantasy which has very little linkage with the mundane world? Did *The Book of the Dun Cow* provide one of your most rewarding reading experiences? If so, you will be the type of fantasy reader who will profit most from *Satyrday*. An elegantly written book by a published poet (who has appeared in *The Nation*, *North American Review*, and elsewhere), *Satyrday* is a fable about talking animals. Some of them use words like "pusillanimity" which set them apart from the animals in children's fantasy. The publisher saw similarities with Walt Disney's *Bambi*, as well as *The Last Unicorn* and *Watership Down*.

The story is about a plot by a great horned owl to upset the balance of the world by sending ravens to capture the moon. When the moon is held captive by the owl in Deadwood Forest, her sister the sun is thrown off her routine and the world is dominated by the owl. There is a satyr (who "has his hooves in two worlds at once"), a badger, and a variety of other creatures who decide their lives will not be the same unless they can free the moon from her captivity. Power and freedom, and their meanings, form the subjects of inquiry of this fable. Fantasy readers who are drawn

to animal fantasies should consider *Satyrday* to be a "find."

Timescoop by John Brunner. Dell Books, \$2.25. DAW Books and Dell have been re-issuing some Brunner novels from the past few years. *Timescoop* is a change of pace from heavier Brunner fare, and shows the humorous side of that writer's output. A 21st century billionaire (by inheritance) named Harold Freitas is insecure in his business and is marriage. Trying to prove himself worthy of his cold wife's attentions, and in order to boost the publicity necessary to Freitas Interplanetary's business health, Harold sets up the biggest family reunion in history. A new company invention, the timescoop, allows people from history to be brought into the present as one-chronon-thick versions which then inflate into real people.

Freitas didn't check with his computer to find out that many of his illustrious ancestors were frauds, low-lives, and scoundrels. By the time his Grand Canyon family reunion is well underway and the world is enthralled, it is too late to send back the troublemakers to the eras where they belong. A charming and funny novel. ●



The same technology that put us on the edge of extinction is also providing us the means to prevent it.

The Incredible Communications Revolution

IMAGINE WHAT it would be like to be able to summon anyone from any corner of the world to your living room at the push of a button, or at the push of another button have access to all the world's accumulated knowledge, or at the push of still another button command the world's greatest artists to perform specifically for you at any time of your choosing. Such power was incomprehensible to the mightiest of ancient kings, yet it will soon be found in even the most modest of households.

Today we all exercise this power to a limited degree every time we dial the phone, play a record, or turn on the TV. But the phone, record player or the TV are all precursors to something far more powerful — the videocom, a complete personal information/communication device used in many science fiction stories (I have used it several times myself). The videocom will be a direct result of the current communications revolution that has been simmering for the past two decades, and suddenly appears ready to boil over.

But why now? The answer lies in two new developments: optical data transmission and compact high speed computers. These technologies, acting synergistically with laser transceivers and communication

J. Ray Dettling

satellites, have shifted our communication technology from low gear to warp drive, and by the year 2000 the result will be a world profoundly different from today.

To illustrate, let us zoom in on one particular family — an average family in the year 2010. Mark Bentley, a pump designer for Fusion International, decided he would spend the day working from his home. There was really no reason to be present at the plant when all he had to do was discuss the new pump drawings with the review board. That could just as easily be handled over the videocom. Besides that, he wanted to be with his wife, Tiffany, and their two children, Michelle and Mark Jr.

The terminal would be available all day, since Tiffany agreed to use the other terminal to do the shopping and update the children's monthly physicals. It would be a bit inconvenient for Mark Jr., their 8 year old boy who also needed the terminal to study for a math test, but somehow Tiffany had it all worked out.

Mark came into the kitchen, stretched out his arms and yawned one last time, then poured himself a cup of coffee. His attention shifted to Tiffany who was reading a printout from the videocom. "Anything from Alphie?" he asked. He had gotten used to referring to the terminal by the name Alphie. Somehow it seemed appropriate that something so much a part of their family should be given a name.

"Nothing important. Oh yes!" Tiffany responded, "I almost forgot, your Design Review meeting was changed from 10:00 to 10:30. The rest was nothing, the usual junk mail. Alphie is saving it, so you can go through it if you want."

"Thanks, I think I'll do that right now, then catch the headlines before work." Mark took his coffee to the family room and confronted a large Picasso occupying half the wall. He pressed several keys on the terminal and the Picasso vanished to be replaced by the accumulated mail. He scanned through it quickly, sent a terse "No thank you" response to a solicitation, then cleared the memory. He took a sip from his coffee then pressed the buttons CURRENT EVENTS/LOCAL HIGHLIGHTS/RECEIVE. Instantly the large screen came alive with the latest news headlines. Something on fusion powered spacecraft caught his attention so he pressed several more buttons, and Alphie responded with details. Being a bit impatient, he decided to

go through it later, so he pressed SAVE, then continued with the rest of the news.

Time passed quickly, and Mark suddenly realized that he'd better have some supporting data handy before the Design Review meeting, so he switched the terminal to audio, then playing the devil's advocate, he carefully phrased his questions. Alphie would have no trouble finding the answers. It had access to every recorded document in history, and it was the best librarian in the world.

As expected, Mark had gotten the data he needed for the meeting, and after the review board approved his design, they commended him for a job well done. Feeling a bit cocky he challenged Alphie to a game of chess, and lost.

Later that evening Mark and Tiffany took the children out for pizza. Before leaving, Mark had instructed the terminal to evaluate their current budget, pay the month's bills, and provide a written statement with a financial forecast for the next month. They just ordered their pizza when an alarm from Tiffany's wristband reminded them of Michelle's social studies assignment. She was supposed to call her friend Nida who lived in Moscow and her other friend Alicia who lived near Ilo, a small town on the southern tip of Peru. The call had to be placed at 7:00 p.m. Even so, it would be early morning in Moscow and late evening in Peru. Mark decided it would be better to take the pizza home.

When they arrived Michelle rushed to the terminal, switched to audio input and asked the videocom to connect her with her two friends. Nida appeared first and began speaking. Michelle did not understand a word of Russian, but it didn't matter, she had already pressed the TRANSLATE key which translated the Russian sentences directly to English after a slight time delay. A few moments later Alicia appeared on the other side of the screen. Although Michelle had never made physical contact with Nida or Alicia, she considered them two of her best friends, and tonight they would help her finish her assignment.

THE ABOVE illustrates the many ways the communications explosion will affect our daily lives. It illustrates the versatility of a single integrated system — the videocom — which will be commonplace at the turn of the century. This device will literally be your window to the world. It will come in many

forms, but a typical unit would consist of a flat TV-like screen and a typewriter-like keyboard. Because of the screen's flat profile it will hang on the wall like a large picture. (Incidentally, flat non-CRT type screens have already been demonstrated, and several companies, including Hitachi, GTE and Lucitron Inc. expect to have them commercially available by 1982.)

From the videocom terminal you can instantly contact anyone on the Earth (or the moon for that matter). All you have to do is key in the appropriate number and you will be face to face with the person you wanted to talk to. A call across the globe need not cost anymore than a call across the street, since all calls will be directed to a geosynchronous satellite 22,300 miles above the Earth. The satellite would then process and relay the call to the appropriate party. At last the long awaited picture phone will be deemed practical.

But the videocom will be far more than a picture phone. It will also be the next generation TV system providing thousands of channels many of which will allow for two or more way interaction. Thus the user could tailor a program to his or her own liking. Indeed, in some cases the user may create his own program. TV commercials may be by request only, as in the yellow pages. Here you simply ask for information on a particular item, and the latest bargains will flash across the screen. If you like what you see and all your additional questions have been answered, you may purchase the item directly from your terminal. After a quick credit verification, your checking account will be appropriately adjusted and a short time later the item would be at your doorstep. All this would be handled electronically; no cash transactions or commuting to the store. As this mode of shopping improves (and this means high quality pictures, eventually three dimensional), the number of large department stores will be reduced to nothing more than warehouses.

The same will be true of libraries. Every recorded document could be digitized and stored electronically, then beamed down on command to your livingroom. Likewise, your mail will be delivered electronically with privacy guaranteed by any number of currently available means. The morning paper, not only your paper but any newspaper throughout the world, will also be available through your videocom. You can ask for the entire paper or request only

the latest developments on those subjects that interest you. If a permanent record is required, the videocom could supply either a hard copy or store the data electronically in its local memory.

When you have finished scanning the news, you may request a movie, the family photo album, or your favorite Michaelangelo, Van Gogh or perhaps a pleasant geometrical pattern to brighten up your wall. For the realist, a real time view of Yosemite Falls, a Tahitian sunset, or Valles Marinaris is also possible — but more expensive since the videocom's local memory cannot be used.

By now many of you are cringing in your seats wondering if the author has ever heard of a thing called *bandwidth* — the limiting factor in information transfer. Our airways are already overcrowded. How can we possibly expect to transmit such enormous quantities of data without gross interference?

The key to this lies in one word, **LIGHT**. A beam of light can potentially transmit nearly one million times more information in a given time than our present microwave sources. We say that light can provide a millionfold improvement in bandwidth. But before we see why this is so, we must back up a bit and examine what we mean by bandwidth.

Table one lists several types of communication schemes along with the maximum rate of information transfer each can provide. We see that smoke signals at best can send information at the rate of two bits or elements of data each second. Each data bit represents either the presence or the absence of smoke. Note that if a steady stream of smoke pulses were generated at the maximum rate, a cyclic pattern or frequency of 1 cycle per second (Hertz) would be required to yield two data bits per second. This limit is inherent in the nature of this particular communication system because it takes a certain time to collect enough smoke to make a discernible signal. Also the warm smoke can only rise so fast, hence one must wait for a large enough space to develop before the next patch of smoke can be delivered. This keeps the signal-to-noise ratio up. If we want to send information at a faster rate, we need to produce a second source of smoke — a second channel.

The following illustrates how frequency sets the limit for information

TABLE ONE

INFORMATION TRANSMISSION RATES FOR VARIOUS COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

COMMUNICATION SYSTEM	BANDWIDTH Bits/Sec/Channel (HZ)	FREQUENCY LIMIT (HZ)
Smoke Signals	2	1
Drums	10	5
Flashing Light	10	5
Telegraphy (Manual)	10	5
Telegraphy (Electromechanical)	850	100,000-1,000,000
Telephony (Wire)	3000	varies up to 1,500,000
	(Many channels)	
Radio (FM)	200,000	108,000,000
	(Up to 100 channels)	
Telephony (Microwave)	3000	4,000,000,000
	(600 channels)	
TV	6,000,000	900,000,000
	(80 channels)	

NEW ELECTROMAGNETIC REAL ESTATE

Millimeter Waves	8,800 TV channels	100,000,000,000
Light Waves	88,000,000 TV channels	1,000,000,000,000,000

NOTE: The big change in communication came with the development of electromagnetic transmission after the turn of the last century. This most certainly was a major factor contributing to our rapid technological progress. With the quantum jump to light, we will see yet a faster technological pace as we get swept along by the new wave of information.

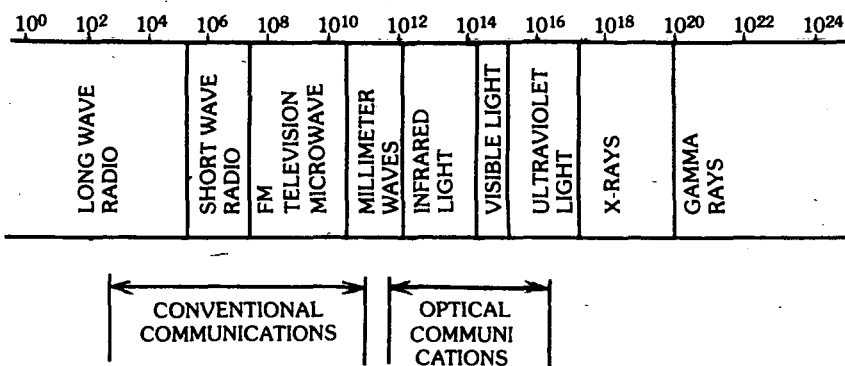
transfer. A step better than smoke signals might be a chain of sound or light pulses such as those generated by striking a hollow log, or flashing a beam of light respectively. Here the best we can expect would be something like 10 bits per second. Our physical limitations prevent sending or deciphering discreet bits of information at rates much higher.

The invention of the teletype was a major breakthrough in that it allowed instantaneous communication over large distances, yet initially it was still limited in its ability to send large amounts of information as long as someone at one end had to manually open and close a switch to establish the data train.

As the system improved, however, electromechanical devices assisted or even replaced the human operator, allowing for a bandwidth near 1000HZ. Telephone systems employ several channels, each with a bandwidth of 3000HZ, and present

TV systems with their large data transmission requirements have bandwidths of 4,500,000HZ per channel. With such a large data requirement for each channel, it is apparent that only a limited number of channels are possible before the entire spectrum allotted to TV broadcast is used up. It is also apparent that if we want to transmit more data we need to find new electromagnetic real estate. Remember, everything from radio waves to light to X-rays, as indicated in Figure 1, are part of the same electromagnetic spectrum. They are only different frequencies of the same phenomenon, much the same as notes on a piano represent different frequencies of sound, except to make the analogy complete, the piano would have to be much wider, about 60 feet across. (It is interesting to note that the piano is an exponential device; that is the frequency doubles every 13 notes or octave. If the piano were a linear device our analog to the elec-

Figure 1 THE ELECTROMAGNETIC SPECTRUM



NOTE: EACH DIVISION MARKED BY POWERS OF 10 REPRESENTS A HUNDREDFOLD INCREASE IN BANDWIDTH POTENTIAL.

fromagnetic spectrum would require a piano spanning the entire width of our galaxy.) The low notes on our piano represent telephony radio signals while the high notes would go well into the X-ray region, and somewhere around middle C we would find visible light.

So the new electromagnetic real estate can be found at the higher frequencies — the still unused portions of the electromagnetic spectrum. Thus far we have used everything up to the tens of billions of Hertz or 10 gigahertz region and the door has already opened to the so-called millimeter or 100 gigahertz level.

Visible light, however, has a frequency pushing 1 million gigahertz or nearly 1 million times the frequency, and therefore the information bandwidth potential of current communication systems. This vast potential has been known for some time, but only recently has the technology become available to exploit at least part of it. First we had to find a suitable means to transmit the light over large distances without losses. The laser, introduced in the late '60s, was the first possibility, but costs were high and successful transmission was dependent on atmospheric conditions.

The real solution came in the '70s with the introduction of ultrapure glass fibers that could carry light signals over great distances with little loss in intensity. These fibers, compared to their copper wire counterparts, offered far more than just improvements in the quantity of data transmitted. Unlike copper wire, the fibers could be made extremely thin without compromising the signal, and since each fiber completely traps its signal, many fibers transmitting different signals over the same frequency range could be bunched together without interference. Finally, the fibers weigh much less than wire making them extremely attractive in applications where weight limitations are critical.

These fiber optic transmission systems represent a gigantic jump in communications in more ways than one. At first the fibers were extremely expensive and difficult to fabricate in long continuous lengths, but because the payoff was so great, an industry-wide technological thrust ensued throughout the '70s with remarkable success. So much so that by the late '70s, several optical communication systems were already being field tested.

At this point I must admit I may have led

you to believe that the utilization of light beams automatically results in a millionfold increase in information transfer. Not necessarily so, and if you check back you'll notice I was very careful to use the term "potential" millionfold increase. The optical region of the electromagnetic spectrum close to 10^{15} Hertz. This means that the electric and magnetic fields that compose a light beam change polarity at the rate approaching 1000 trillion times every second. (Actually the frequency range of visible light lies between 300-700 trillion Hertz.) This also means that in order to fully exploit this potential we must be able to encode the information signal at the same rate. The electric wire of Samuel Morse was capable of transmitting data at thousands, even millions, of bits per second, but that could not be exploited as long as someone had to manually open and close a contact switch.

Likewise, today's technology is not quite ready to switch an electrical signal at optical frequencies, but we are getting close. In the last five years we have been able to switch electrical signals on and off a million times every millionth of a second, which represents a trillion bits of data every second. This is equivalent to transmitting the entire contents of 200,000 average size books in that same second. This is far beyond the capability of conventional communications systems.

STILL, HIGH SPEED data transmission is not the only part of the communication's picture. The system must also contain a sophisticated, high speed data processing facility to keep track, decode, and distribute this vast amount of information. The current microelectronics revolution came just in time to handle this formidable task. Some of today's handheld computers are more powerful than the biggest machines 20 years ago — and there appears to be no end in sight with respect to decreasing size and cost while increasing capability.

Arthur J. Cordell, of the Science Council of Canada, pointed out to the First Global Conference on the Future held in Toronto, Canada, that the power of computers has increased 10,000 times in the past 15 years while the relative price has decreased 100,000 times. He further estimates that by 1990 computer memory cost will be decreased by another factor of 400 from today's cost while computer speed will increase 4000 times.

So our ability to reap this millionfold communication potential is quickly being realized, and with the privacy that each fiber provides, in addition to its small diameter, it will be possible to run thousands of these fibers in a single cable to provide even a billionfold improvement over our current system. The possibilities are staggering.

But we won't have to wait long for some of these possibilities. Indeed, this evolutionary leap in communications technology has already started. Many offices are being equipped with "smart" phones incorporating automatic dialing, call back, call forwarding, paging, and multiparty conference features. Some even display the elapsed time and the accumulated cost for each call.

Recently Bell Telephone announced the successful demonstration of a 7KM fiber optic link with a transmission rate of 274 million bits/sec — enough for 4032 simultaneous telephone conversations. Standard Elektrik Lorenz AG, a West German subsidiary of ITT Corp. has completed a 320-fiber cable in West Berlin to carry telephony to 150 homes. Britain, Japan, Canada and the United States have also introduced fiber optic systems with many more planned, leaving no doubt that fiber optic links are the wave of the future. Similarly, CompuServe Inc. began offering the U.S.'s first electronic newspaper, the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch, in July 1980. At the same time AT&T is gearing up to offer electronic yellow pages carrying local and national advertising. While I am writing this article, fiberoptic cable and repeater equipment developed by Northern Telecom is being readied to extend cable television services to more than 500,000 people along a 3200-Km route in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada.

And soon the up and coming electronic mail system will spell the demise of yet another symbol of our time — like the town blacksmith and ice man, the mailman will become another relic of a pretechnological era. Between corporations and offices, electronic mail has been in limited use over the last decade. But here again, data transmission rates were slow resulting in limited utility. The fiber optic boom is changing all that. It has been estimated that by 1985 more than 65% of the internal mail of the 500 largest American companies will be transmitted by electronic means. As

more homes become equipped with video terminals, the incentives for electronic mail will increase.

Thus the evolution to the integrated video terminal (IVT) or videocom as I have called it earlier is clear, but it will not always require a large home terminal to transmit and receive this data. Our world is perpetually shrouded by a thick electromagnetic atmosphere. Billions — correction: trillions — of invisible bits of information surround each and every one of us 24 hours a day. If our eyes were sensitive to this region of the electromagnetic spectrum and our brains were equipped to decode the data, we would be able to see everything that is picked up by our radio and TV. The night sky would be a kaleidoscope of dancing colors. But our anatomy does not have these facilities, however the next best thing will soon be possible — the portable videocom.

Carried like a pocket calculator or worn like a wristwatch, the portable videocom will be a multi-purpose communication device serving as a videotelephone, TV, radio, computer, distress signal and a host of other devices, some of which haven't been imagined yet. Sound farfetched? Not at all. A limited number of wrist telephones are already in service, and according to a forecast by the International Resource Development Inc., 20 million units will be in service by 1990.

Tomorrow's technology will integrate the portable phone with the wristwatch and the personal computer. Furthermore, many units will respond to voice commands and provide a verbal output. Windert, a manufacturer of digital electronic watches, claims to have a talking watch which is expected to be on the market sometime this year. Several other manufacturers already offer full scientific calculators on their watches. Soon we will be able to receive digital weather, stock market reports, and news headlines. More important, our vital signs could be continuously monitored. After all, the wrist is the ideal location for measuring pulse and blood pressure. This wrist communicator could also be rigged with an alarm system that would alert the user of any anomalous condition. Or should a serious condition occur, the nearest emergency center would be alerted.

Similarly the device could stave off an aggressor by sounding an alarm while

simultaneously notifying the authorities. Local relay stations, acting together with a large aperture communication satellite, would instantly determine our exact position.

In the 21st Century nearly everyone will have one of these portable videocoms; in fact, it may be illegal not to have one on your possession. Another blow to our right of privacy — a right which is rapidly being reduced to a mere privilege. In the future, privacy may be a luxury few of us could afford. But we may gladly relinquish this right for something far better — a world of greatly reduced violence and crime. In a world so intimately linked, the old adage "Crime does not pay" may finally be verified.

Even more significant, international tensions will be eased as every citizen of Earth is inundated with a myriad of divergent political philosophies. Cultures will be cross pollinated with alternate points of view, and for the first time in history we will begin to see a new hope for world peace as nationalism evolves to globalism. Like a large organic sieve, each and every one of us will see and evaluate the benefits and detriments of every other culture as well as our own, and in the years that follow, our sociological evolution will proceed toward optimization of a new planetary culture. It is indeed remarkable that the same technology that has put us on the edge of extinction is also providing the means to prevent it.

H.G. Wells once remarked that future history will be a race between *education* and *catastrophe*. So far, the race has been close, and the outcome is still anybody's guess. The current communications revolution may have come just in time to quench the petty squabbles between nations once and for all. Moreover, it will have laid the seeds for unifying our planet. Arthur C. Clarke, perhaps the true father of the communication satellite, recognized its ultimate value in his 1971 address to the ambassadors of the United Nations gathered at the State Department for the signing of the Intelsat Agreement. After comparing communications satellites to the telegraph and railroads, the foundation of the United States, Mr. Clarke continues . . .

"I hope you will remember this analogy in the years ahead. For today, whether you intend it or not — whether you *wish* it or not — you have signed far more than just another intergovernmental agreement.

"You have just signed the first draft of the Articles of Federation of the United States of Earth."

Yet there are still pessimists and soothsayers of doom who will claim that global communications will only serve to increase international tensions because nations will exploit these new technologies and saturate the air waves with propaganda and political brainwashing. Those in power will engage in an escalating war of words until physical conflict becomes inevitable.

Despite a certain amount of evidence to support their position, the arguments are shallow and reflect a failure to understand the full impact of tomorrow's communications technology. With respect to communications, there are three scenarios in which nations coexist: 1) In total isolation without any communication, 2) with some interaction and limited communication and 3) under total open communication. The first case is relatively safe since for all practical purposes neither nation is aware of the other's existence. This state of existence, however, is no longer possible on this planet for a number of reasons based upon demands for food, energy and other natural resources. Furthermore, the impact of individual acts is no longer limited by national boundaries. Finally, *the cat's out of the bag*. They know about us and we know about them.

The second case reflects our current situation. The communication between nations today is extremely limited and often filtered by government officials on all sides before getting to the general public. This scenario is certainly the most dangerous of all. We have all heard the expression "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." This is even more true in communication where one nation knows just enough about the other to recognize it as a potential threat.

The third scenario, which we are just stepping into, will fill the gaps left by the second. The microelectronics revolution is making total global communications not only possible but affordable to everyone. Gigabits upon gigabits of multicultural viewpoints perpetually rain upon tiny receivers all over the world. Censorship would be impossible. No nation could stop its people from seeing our way of life, nor could our officials prevent our exposure to other political philosophies. In the long run a global philosophy, most certainly a combination of many viewpoints, will emerge

and the world will be a different place in which all distance barriers have vanished. Whether we like it or not we will soon all be living under one roof.

Given the tools of communication, humanity will exploit them to their limit, for the need to communicate is as fundamental as the need for food and water. If you don't believe this, consult any psychology text on sensual deprivation studies. We fear the prospect of death because we can't bear the thought of severing all communications with the Universe. This is perhaps best illustrated by a rather remarkable if not bizarre device called the "Memorial Audio Reproduction System," designed by S. Zelazny and M. Opiela of Pleasanton, California. This device is a solar powered tape recorder intended to fit snugly into a tombstone to leave a talking epitaph or self-made eulogy for the benefit of posterity. It represents a crude form of communication after death.

At the cutting edges of technology, other novel forms of communication will allow us to reach remote places through barriers impenetrable by current communication methods. There are numerous such places including the bottom of the ocean, cavities deep within the Earth, and locations where electromagnetic interference precludes conventional communications. By utilizing Mu-mesons or muons, one can penetrate several meters of reinforced concrete with little loss in signal strength. Muons are easy to generate and detect in the laboratory, therefore a modulated beam of these particles would serve as a communication medium. Muons have already been proposed for X-raying the pyramids and detection of resources under the Earth's crust.

Recent interest has developed over another communications contender, the neutrino. These strange particles can pass unperturbed through the entire Earth as if the Earth were nothing more than a thin gas. It has been said that neutrinos can pass through a slab of lead as much as 50 lightyears thick. The naval Research Laboratory, among others, is already at work trying to utilize a modulated neutrino beam to communicate with its deeply submerged submarines. The major problem is that because neutrinos rarely interact with matter, it takes a large number of neutrinos and a large mass detector to establish a simple data link of 10 bits per second. So with neutrinos we are back to a

shade better than smoke signals.

Perhaps future technologists will exploit neutrino communication as we have exploited the electromagnetic spectrum. If so, technologists will learn as much about the Earth's interior as we know about its surface. Also there will be no refuge from the eyes and ears of detectors. There are no known neutrino shields. Yet our yearning for better communication won't end with neutrinos. We will always seek larger bandwidths, faster transmission, and increased signal definition. Ultimately we may find a

new communication medium that is not limited by the speed of light. Perhaps in the hypothetical tachyons (here some questions of causality remain to be resolved) or maybe the answer will lie within the fabric of space and time itself. But once the answer is found we will become part of a cosmic elite that communicates on a level we can hardly imagine today. Just as the current communication revolution will unify our planet, the next communication revolution promises to unite us with the cosmos. ●

intercom

Intercom seeks letters discussing ideas expressed in articles or fiction on our pages — or something that may be of general interest to our readers.

Dear Editor:

I have read many fine stories in *Fantastic* and *Amazing*, and some klunkers. It seems to me that Harlan Ellison's "Run, Spot, Run" is, in spite of his sanctimonious denial, a mercenary exploitation of past material. If this story is any indication, the novel *Blood's a Rover* will fit in the pattern: story + sequel + sequel, and it won't be a rising series.

Which reminds me: the "Amazing Hall of Fame" is a transparent device to run reprints, and reduce production costs. Get rid of it. If you want to reprint good stories from past issues, publish an anthology.

I have noticed some disturbing indications that you may be aiming for a juvenile market, or one not familiar with sf. It seems to me that this is the way to lose the sf fan without gaining the general reader. But I hope I'm wrong. The article "Quest for the Stars" for example, covers some old ground. Detting is not hard-nosed enough in his evaluation of methods on interstellar travel. Some of the methods he classes as simply beyond the realm of "contemporary" physics, are, according to what we know, impossible for anyone's physics, no matter how advanced. For example: no matter how advanced an alien's technology

is, he cannot get nuclear fuel out of iron, which has the lowest energy level of any nucleus; devices like hyperspace and warped spacetime are simply devices to make it easier for writers; and as to "psychokinesis" you might just as well put in "space travel by Miracle and Holy Spirit." I am reminded of Sprague de Camp's remark that there is far more documentary evidence for the existence of werewolves than for the possibility of time travel.

Michael O'Brien
New Haven, CT

I'll take issue with you on the first two counts, and let Ray Detting answer the third. Ellison's Blood's a Rover is an episodic novel, not a series of sequels. He created a setting that provides a rich source for a number of stories, and "Run, Spot, Run" is one that adds a totally new dimension to the characters of both boy and dog.

The Hall of Fame has been well received. It offers new forewords along with great stories from the past by now-famous authors. Note — we are re-buying these stories: not just reprinting them. — EM

Detting replies:

Dear Mr. O'Brien

Here are some comments regarding your letter discussing my article on interstellar transport. I found that I could not agree

with much of what you said.

Because of the vast distances involved, many physicists and philosophers have already "thrown in the towel" and placed any thoughts of star travel in the realms of sheer fantasy. Indeed some of the brightest minds have been intimidated by the formidable energy required to send even a modest payload to the closest star. "The Quest for Interstellar Transport" was written not to claim a solution to the problem of starflight, but to point out that it is far too soon to give up on the problem. There are many strange things happening in the cosmos right now that are challenging our current physical theories. Even causality itself is coming under fire. Before we rule out starflight, these and other things must be checked out.

As for being hard-nosed, I am one of the most hard-nosed physicists I know. Before I say something is impossible, it better damn well be proven so. Current physical theory is based on models that only approximate nature's laws. There are countless undiscovered loopholes for the enquiring scientist to exploit, but some of these can only be found if an open mind is maintained.

When you say "impossible for anyone's physics according to what we know," you are saying in effect "quite possible indeed;" because when one considers the age of our civilization in terms of its potential lifespan, we are still in our embryonic stage of development — and there is a hell of a lot of physics left to learn. I suspect that the physics of star flight is no further from us than the physics of color TV was to Jules Verne.

One final point: Devices like hyperspace and warped spacetime are realities, not just convenient gimmicks for science fiction writers (although I have to agree, they are that, too). In both the microcosmic universe of the particle physicist and the macrocosmic universe of the astrophysicist, warped spacetime is as real as atoms and galaxies.

Best Regards and Think Positive,

J. Ray Dettling
Santa Clara, CA

Dear Elinor:

"The Blue-Nose Limit" is remarkable; it is the kind of story which makes one feel that if one has done nothing else but publish

that story, one has justified any number of sins. Whether John Steakley can go on in this market is problematic, but the purity, narrative drive and integrity of the story mark it as one hell of a one-shot if that is what it turns out to be.

It is a stunner, its appearance in *Amazing* is a credit to all of you. At another time in another world (say the 5/47 *Astounding* or the 6/53 *Galaxy* or *Orbit* 2) the story would have been read by everyone within the field within a few months and would have made Steakley famous and would be anthologized for thirty years. But the way things are now he's probably lucky to have sold it (and you to have it) and I wish him well.

Barry N. Malzberg
Teaneck, NJ

John Steakley is presently working on a novel and promises more short stories in the future. He is thrilled with your estimation of his work, as am I and the *Amazing* staff. We can only hope your gloomy outlook for the future of sf will not prevail. Let's all keep faith with the "true spirit".
— EM

Dear Ms. Mavor:

Rereading Robert Silverberg's column on the non-written word vs. the written word just now reminds me of many thoughts I've had over the past several months concerning a similar matter.

I work in a bookstore at the present time, and I am permitted to decide which books we order every month, from various fields. Among the various books are a number of science fiction titles. The books (paperbacks all) reflect a combination of what I think will sell and my own tastes.

Therefore, in the science fiction selection, we have the current offerings by Pohl and Anderson and Leiber and many others side by side with the new *Star Trek* books and *Battlestar Galactica* and the Blade series and Tolkien-copies and so on.

To my great surprise, the *Battlestars* and *Trek*ers and pseudo-Tolkienes sell better than the good stuff by the good authors.

We're a marginal outfit at best. We have to order a minimum of three copies per title and we sell only about a third of these. But the last *Star Trek* book almost sold out and the last *Battlestar Galactica* did sell out and

so did the current Lin Carter pseudo-Burroughs and so on . . . while *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon* and *The Mermen's Children* and various collections and anthologies sold poorly.

From this pattern, I'm forced to assume that the simpler the book the better it will sell, that those connected with a TV show (good or bad) sell better than those that aren't, that a series sells better than an unconnected book, that the Big Names of sf don't sell as well as one would think.

Of course, some Big Names did sell well. We had Silverberg's *Time of the Great Freeze* and two of Heinlein's juveniles and they sold well despite being reprints. But we have had reprints of the more complex books and they haven't sold well at all.

The trend is obvious and exactly what Robert Silverberg was talking about.

Robert Nowall
Cape Coral, FL

Dear Ellie:

Cheers to Bob Silverberg for his "Opinion" column in the May *Amazing*. The bookstands, like the movie houses are flooded with *drech*, more pretty pictures and less and less to read. Pity. It was such a nice habit.

Parke Godwin
Manhattan, NY

I guess this is what Barry Malzberg is worried about, too. — EM

Dear Elinor,

I noticed — one could hardly miss — *Amazing's* ad in the new *Locus*. Judging by past *Locus* polls, it seems like a good move — we should be reaching more *Locus* readers than we are (note use of presumptive we by contributor). I would think that the ad also says something positive about the state of the balance sheet, which if true is good news.

It's also clear from the ad and recent issues that your desktop is becoming crowded with Big Names. Hopefully, not too crowded for old friends —

Mike-Kube-McDowell
Goshen, IN

The desktop will never be too crowded for old friends or new ones, for that matter. With your recent sales to IASFM, you may be on your way to being a Big Name, anyway, Mike. All best of luck. — EM

Dear Elinor,

The real gem of the May issue was "The Fall," by Lisa Tuttle and George R.R. Martin. I always worry about excerpts from novels; sometimes they begin in the middle of something, and end in the middle of something, and end up not being stories at all but merely fragments of a larger work. Well, it is obvious that "The Fall" is part of a larger work, but at the same time it certainly stands on its own very well. It is a beautiful story, and beautifully written. I shall buy the entire book (*Windhaven*) when it comes out.

The Silverberg essay was well-put, on a topic that is one of my concerns. "Opinion" is a valuable addition to the magazine. Its appearance did, however, give me the feeling that I'm not keeping up with the field very well. The loss of both *Galileo* and *Galaxy* is surprising and rather disheartening, though I suspect (not having the hard facts) that the demise of the magazines was due to expanding too quickly without a solid financial base. *Galaxy's* sinking for the second time marks the end of a proud thirty-year tradition; it is hard to believe that only six or seven years ago, with James Baen as editor, *Galaxy* had achieved sales of about 60,000 to 70,000 and was the second-highest circulation mag in the field. I am glad that before *Galaxy* and *Galileo* went bottoms up the field got one new successful magazine (*IA'sfm*) and saw the rebirth of its oldest mag (you!). Otherwise, the state of magazine sf would be even gloomier than it is now.

The Sucharitkul piece was good; I hope you publish more of him. The Wightman piece was up to the usual high standards. "A Smell of Sulphur" was well-written; it made a point; but the ending was rather obscure to someone like myself, with little grounding in fantasy or the Oz series.

The articles were all first rate as well; I may even work up a story from an idea in the Brian Fraser article.

Both covers (back and front) were superb. The inside illustrations were of the same high quality; I was especially pleased to see some of Alicia Austin's work, and I like the idea of having Steve Fabian il-

lustrate the "Hall of Fame" series.

Liked the Hank Stine piece, too — I have a failing for short, bitter, biting vignettes.

Indeed, I have only one question: how much smaller are you going to make the type before it disappears from view into a grey blur? I myself like small type; the size it is now, you're getting 180 pages into 130, and when you expand to 180, you'll be able to get 250 pages in! However, I would think that people who can't see it may have trouble seeing the advantages.

Anyway, a superb issue. Thanks for the enjoyment.

Dave Stoyer
Tillsonberg, Ontario

Thanks for your comments. Our type size, 9/10 for most fiction, is 1 point smaller than that used by many magazines, but allows us to compete in the quantity offered until we can increase our number of pages. — EM

Editor:

I love the magazine, but what happened to Steve Fahnestalk's informative "Fans, Prose & Cons" column? I'm sure I'm not the only one who misses it...?

Ed Fowler
San Antonio, TX

Our growing space problem plus other commitments for Steve have conspired to prevent us from presenting this fine column on a regular basis. Steve will be reporting on the happenings at the upcoming worldcon, Denvention II (Sept. 3-7, Denver Hilton, Denver, Colorado). — EM

THEIR TERMINALS HAVE SAID

It's evening in the Western world, O servitors
Of justice!

& I am watching the changing of the workshift
The shutting down

Of their Information Factories for the day

A general darkening of lives

& towers, everyone freely turning from

Labor to the symbols of a shadowed Leisure, pow!

And wow! while somewhere far below the billioned

Hurrying, herding pairs of pedestrian feet

Strangely beat the hearts of Robot-giants in perfect

Stillness, in pallid

Sewer-calm, their superconducting systoles

& diastoles relay data inward, out: all a motionless

Measure: and deeper there is a pounding din

Of digestive units, secret images of a Chronopathic

Power over thought, & the revolve of years

... Outside, their songs, inhuman voices

Ride invisible rays to heaven — are wordless/concrete

Colored, white & blue electric traceries on crystalline

Receiving sets; within booths, are hotly rowed

As intricate light-urns in a high-rise columbarium

... Their terminals have said good-night, & talk to ghosts

— Robert Frazier & Andrew Joron

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Roger Zelazny **MADWAND**

Excerpted from the forthcoming Doubleday novel, Madwand. In this sequence we witness the Initiation of Pol Detson, possessor of untrained powers — a Madwand who searches for his identity in a land of magic, intrigue and treachery.

Synopsis

POL DETSON, infant son of the evil sorcerer Det Morson, had, upon his father's death in the aftermath of a hard-fought war, been exchanged for young Daniel Chain (later to be known as Mark Marakson), son of an engineer in a parallel world. This represented an act of mercy on the victors' part. Not wanting to slay a baby, yet knowing from the dragon-shaped birthmark upon Pol's right wrist that he would one day be a powerful sorcerer himself, they sought to remove him to a world where his powers would be meaningless. However, as time passed, Dan

Chain/Mark Marakson came to represent a possibly greater menace than Pol might have, in his attempts to resurrect science in this world of magic.

Pol, just entering adulthood, was then summoned back by old Mor, the sorcerer who had banished him. Following a series of adventures, Pol discovered his heritage and finally fought a massive battle — of magic against science — in which he succeeded in destroying his step-brother. All of this occurred in the book *Changeling*.

Some months later, Pol was attacked at the family castle, Rondoval, by a sorcerer

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Illustrated by Gary Freeman

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intent upon stealing seven magical statuettes which had belonged to Det, and which had played a peculiar and ambiguous part in the earlier battle. Rescued at the last moment by his only friend, Mouseglove the thief, Pol resolved to learn more about the statuettes as well as the nature of his own powers. To do this, he undertook a pilgrimage to Mt. Belken where a sorcerers' gathering was about to take place.

He began having strange dreams along the way, involving a massive gateway to a somewhat sinister world. In the course of his journey to Belken, he joined the company of the aged sorcerer Ibal, who later of-

fered to sponsor him for magical initiation once they reached that place. His dragon-mark and his distinctive black hair with its white streak running from front to back, were disguised before this occurred, by a mysterious nameless sorcerer who had also granted Pol release from a nightmare involving the Gate. In disguise then, he came to the magical city at the foot of Belken. There he was accepted as a candidate for the magical initiation, which he hoped would bring his own fledgling powers under increased control as well as lead to greater understanding of the mysteries amid which he found himself.

Pol Detson took his loaf and his water flask with him to the Arch of the Blue Bird. His friend, Mouseglove, accompanied him to that point. Larick and six of the others were already present. The westering sun had encountered a cloudbank and the city took on its evening sheen prematurely. The other candidates for initiation were uniformly young and nervous; and Pol forgot their names — except for Nupf, with whom he was already acquainted.

The sky continued to darken while they waited for the others, and Pol idly let his vision slip into the second seeing. As he cast his gaze about he noted a blue-white pyramid or-cone near the center of town, a thing which had not registered itself upon his normal perceptions. Continuing to watch it for a time, he gained the impression that it was growing. He moved his seeing back to its normal mode and the phenomenon faded.

Making his way past the other candidates, he approached the leader, Larick, who stood, obviously impatient now, watching the massing clouds.

"Larick?"

"What do you want?"

"Just curious. Would you know what that big cone of blue light growing up over there is?"

Larick turned and stared for several moments, then, "Oh," he said. "That is for our benefit — and it reminds me again just how late things are getting. Where the devil are the rest of them?" He turned, looking in several directions, and then a certain tension seemed to go out of him. "Here they come," he said, noting three figures on a distant walkway.

He turned back to Pol.

"That cone you see is the force being raised by an entire circle of sorcerers," he explained. "By the time we enter Belken, it will have reached the mountain and filled it, attuning all ten stations within to greater cosmic forces. As you move from one to the other, each a symbolic representation of one of your own lights, the energies will flow through you and you will thereby be shaped, reshaped and attuned yourself."

"I see."

"I am not certain that you do, Dan. The other nine candidates, serving proper apprenticeships, should have developed their lights properly, in the natural order. For them, tonight's experience should only be an intensification with some minor balancing. With you, though — a Madwand may take any path. It could prove painful, distressing, even maddening or fatal. I do not say this to discourage or frighten, merely to prepare you. Try not to allow anything that oc-

curs to cause you undue distress."

Here Larick bit his lip and looked away.

"Where — where are you from?" he asked.

"A very distant land. I'm sure you would never have heard of it."

"What did you do there?"

"Many things. I suppose I was best at being a musician."

"What about magic?"

"It was not known in that place."

Larick shook his head.

"How could that be?"

"It is just the way that things were."

"Then yourself? How did you come to this land? And how did you become a Madwand?"

For a moment, Pol found himself wanting to tell Larick his story. But prudence put a limit to his desire.

"It is a very long tale," he said, looking back over his shoulder, "and the other three are almost here."

Larick glanced in that direction.

"I suppose that you had some interesting experiences once you discovered your abilities?" he said hurriedly.

"Yes, many," Pol replied. "They might fill a book."

"Do any stand out in your memory as particularly significant?"

"No."

"I get the impression that you do not like to talk about these things. All right. There is no requirement that you do so. But if you would tell me, I would like to know one thing."

"What is that?"

"A white magician may on occasion use what is known as black magic, and vice-versa. We know that it is all much the same and that it is intent that makes the difference — and that it is from intent alone that the magician's path might be described. Have you yet chosen one path or the other?"

"I have used what I had to use as I had to use it," Pol said. "I like to think that my intentions were relatively pure, but then most people so justify themselves in their own eyes. I mean well, most of the time."

Larick smiled and shook his head.

"I wish that I had more time to talk with you, for I feel something very peculiar behind your words. Have you ever used magic with great force against another human being?"

"Yes."

"What became of that person?"

"He is dead."

"Was he also a sorcerer?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly? How can that be? A person either is or is not."

"This was a very special case."

Larick sighed and then smiled again.

"Then you are a black magician."

"You said it. I didn't."

The three final candidates now approached the group and were introduced. Larick looked them all over and then addressed them:

"We are late getting started. We will head along this way immediately and then proceed until we have departed the city. The trail will commence shortly

thereafter and we will begin our climb. I do not know yet how many — if any — rest stops we may make along the way. It depends on our progress and the time.” He gestured toward a heap of folded white garments. “Each of you pick up a robe on the way by. We’ll don them right before we enter.”

He turned and passed under the arch, moving away.

Mouseglove approached Pol.

“I’ll be at the exit point in the morning,” he said. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Pol hurried after the others, moving toward the head of the group. When he glanced back, Mouseglove was gone. He continued his pace until he caught up with Larick, falling into step beside him.

“I am curious,” he said, “why you are trying so hard to make me out a black magician.”

“It is nothing to me,” the other replied. “Those of all persuasions meet and mix freely in this place.”

“But I am not. At least, I don’t think I am.”

“It is of no importance.”

Pol shrugged.

“Have it your way, then.”

He slowed his pace and fell back among the group of apprentices. Nupf came up next to him.

“Bit of a surprise here, eh?” the apprentice said.

“What do you mean?”

“The suddenness of it all. Ibal doesn’t even know I’m on my way. He’s still—” He paused and grinned. “—occupied.”

“At least he got my name onto the list before he turned his attention to other matters.”

“It was not entirely altruistic of him,” Nupf replied. “I envy you considerably, should you come through this intact.”

“How so?”

“You don’t know?”

Pol shook his head.

“Madwands — particularly those who make it through initiation,” Nupf explained, “are, almost without exception, the most powerful sorcerers of all. Of course, there aren’t that many around. Still, that is why Ibal would like to have you remember him with a certain fondness and gratitude.”

“I’ll be damned,” Pol said.

“You really didn’t know?”

“Not in the least. Could that have anything to do, I wonder, with Larick’s efforts to find out whether I’m black or white?”

Nupf laughed.

“I suppose he hates to see the opposite side get a good recruit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I don’t really know that much about him, but the rumor going around among the other candidates has it that Larick is so lily white he spends all of his free time hating the other side. He is also supposed to be very good — in a purely technical sense.”

“I’m getting tired of being misjudged,” Pol said. “It’s been going on all my life.”

“It would be best to put up with a little more of it, for now.”

“I wasn’t thinking of disturbing the initiation.”

“I’m sure he’ll run it perfectly. Whites are very conscientious.”

Pol laughed. He adjusted his vision and looked back at the cone of power. It

had grown noticeably. He turned away and moved on toward the mounting clouds. Belken had already acquired something of radiance beneath them.

SEATED UPON the wide ledge outside the cavemouth, three-quarters of the way up the mountain's western face, Pol finished his bread and drank the rest of his water while watching the sun sink beneath the weight of starless night. There had been only one brief break on the way up and his feet throbbed slightly. He imagined the others were also somewhat footsore.

There came a flash of lightning in the southwest. A cold wind which had followed them more than halfway up made a little whistling noise among rocky prominences overhead. The mountain had a faint glow to it, which it seemed to acquire every night, only tonight it continued to brighten even as he watched. And when he shifted over to second seeing it seemed as if all of Belken were afire with a slowly undulating blue flame. He was about to comment upon it to Nupf when Larick rose to his feet and cleared his throat.

"All right. Put the robes on over your clothes and line up before the entrance," he said. "It will be a bit of a walk to the first station. I will lead the way. There is to be no talking unless you are called upon for responses."

They unfolded the coarse white garments and began donning them.

"... And any visions or transformations you may witness — along with any alterations of awareness — are occasions neither for distress nor comment. Accept everything that comes to you, whether it seems good or bad. Transformations themselves may well be transformed before the night is over."

They lined up behind him.

"This is your last chance for questions."

There were none.

"Very well."

Larick proceeded at a deliberate pace into the cavemouth. Pol found himself near the middle of the line which followed him. His vision slipped back into its natural range. The bluish glow diminished somewhat but did not depart. The narrow, high-walled cave into which they entered pulsed in the same fashion as the outer slopes of the mountain, giving sufficient, if somewhat unsettling, illumination to light their progress. As they passed further along, the brightness and movement intensified to the point where the walls were submerged within it, vanishing from sight, and it was as if they walked a fire-girt avenue out of dream between celestial and infernal abodes, its direction being a matter of conjecture as well as mood.

A distant rumble of thunder reached them as the way curved to the left, then to the right, slanting upward. It steepened rapidly after that, and in a few step-like places the worn floor seemed to show evidence of human handiwork.

Another turn and it steepened even more sharply, and heavy guide-ropes appeared at either hand. At first, the candidates were loathe to take hold of them, for the action was tantamount to placing one's hands among leaping flames; but after a time they had no choice. There was no sensation of warmth; Pol felt only a vague tingling on his palms, though his dragonmark began to throb beneath its disguise after several moments. The air grew warmer as they mounted, and he could hear the sounds of his companions' labored breathing as they hurried to keep up with Larick.

Abruptly, they entered a grotto. The guide-ropes ended. The floor of the landing on which they halted was more nearly level. Immediately before them lay a large, circular pool blazing with white light as if illuminated from below. Low-dipping stalactites shone like icicles above it. The walls came down almost to its

edges, save for the stony tongue on which they stood. Almost, for a narrow ledge seemed to circle that entire bright lens of still liquid.

Larick motioned them out upon the ledge immediately. They edged their way out and around, backs brushing against the rough rock. After several minutes, Larick began signing them to halt or move on, until all of them were distributed in accordance with some plan known only to himself. Then he moved out to the edge of the spit from which he had conducted the arrangement and stared down into the radiant waters. The candidates did the same.

The light dazzled Pol's eyes at first, but he soon became aware of his own bleached reflection, the irregular sculpture of the roof like some fantastic landscape behind it. He looked into his own eyes; a stranger, for this was the face of the disguise he still wore — heavier brow, scar upon the left cheek.

Suddenly, his reflection melted, to be replaced by the image of his true face — leaner, thinner of lip, possessed of a higher hairline — with the white streak running back through his dark locks. He tried to raise his hand to his face and discovered that a strange lethargy with a dull species of sluggishness had come over him. His hand only twitched slightly and he made no further effort to move it. Then he became aware of a voice speaking the words he had but recently learned. It was Larick's, and when he had finished speaking they were repeated by the first candidate upon the far edge of the pool. They echoed through the chamber and tolled inside his head. A faint, sweet scent rose to his nostrils. The next candidate began speaking the same words, and in a part of his mind Pol knew that when his turn came he would be repeating them. Yet, in a way, it seemed as if something within him were already saying them. He felt himself in some way detached from time. There was no time here, only the light and the reflected face. The words rolled toward him, awakening things deep within his being. Then he saw that the reflection was smiling. He was not aware of any movement of his own face. As he watched now, the image wavered and divided itself. It was suddenly as if he had two heads — one which continued smiling to the point of a sneer, the other bearing a massively sad expression. Slowly, they turned to face one another. He was riven by peculiar emotions. How long these persisted, he could not tell, as he observed the two who were one in their archetypal debate. It was only slowly that a vague feeling of wrongness began to come over him.

Then he realized that he was indeed speaking. His turn had come and he had begun his part in the circle without being aware of it. The words vibrated within him, and the world seemed oddly altered — distanced — about him. The light from below his feet grew even brighter. The images within the pool were warped, folded back upon themselves. The two heads of his reflection merged, to become his solitary, unsmiling countenance. A feeling of exhilaration grew within him now and the sense of wrongness was swept away. His head seemed full of light as he uttered the final syllable.

It passed then to the woman to his left, who began the intonation. Pol lost all sense of self now, as well as time and place, and merely existed within the sound and the light, feeling changes pass through him, until it was over.

Without any word or visible sign, he knew when they were finished. The light in the depths coalesced, seemed to take on the form of a great egg, while the final speaker went through his part. Then, for a long while they stood in silence regarding the depths. Without cue, Pol suddenly raised his head and looked toward Larick. As his gaze moved across the chamber, he saw that all of the others were looking up and turning simultaneously. Slowly then, the candidates moved on along the ledge.

When they reached its end and came onto the pier, Larick raised an arm, gestured toward his left, then turned and led them through a very narrow cut behind a screen of rock which none had noticed before. After several paces, moving sideways, it widened. Almost immediately, Larick dropped to his hands and knees and crawled into a small, black hole. One by one, the others did the same. The pale, flame-like light and the undulance were present there, also, but inches away in any direction.

Progress was slow, for they worked their way downward, fighting against slip-page, crawling flat-bellied through particularly low places, twisting and scraping themselves as they negotiated turns.

The candidate before and below him halted suddenly, and Pol did the same. He heard a grunt from the rear as the one behind him was drawn up short. The walls had paled somewhat to a grayish tone with a pink cast to them.

The candidate before him began inching forward again and Pol did the same slowly. This continued for approximately one body-length, then was followed by another halt. Pol, still giddy from the opening experience, felt unable completely to control his thoughts. He alternated between mild distress and resignation over this.

After a brief pause, they advanced again, a similar distance. Several more such, and Pol saw its cause. There was a circular opening in the floor. The candidates eased themselves down through it, hung at arm's length and then dropped.

He waited for a time after the one before him passed through, then lowered himself, hung a moment and let go.

It was not a long drop. He landed with his knees bent and immediately moved to the side. Shortly, he joined the others, who stood near the center of the chamber where the roof was high, arranged in a circle in accordance with Larick's gesturing, around the most prominent object in sight — a pink stalactite several times his own height, rising from a large, bumpy, roughly rectangular piece of rock.

When they were all in position about it, Larick motioned them back, spreading the formation to positions as far away from the towering object as the geometry of the cavern permitted. For a moment, the man's eyes met his own, and Pol, unaccountably, felt that there was pain within them. Then Larick moved away, to mount a rock at the far corner of the chamber. Shortly, everyone's gaze left him and returned to the object before them.

Pol relaxed, assuming a contemplative state of mind once again. He looked up and then down the monolith. He felt the power in the place. He slipped his vision into the second seeing for a moment, but there was no change other than an increased brightness to the stalactite. There were not even any drifting strands in the vicinity, a phenomenon which struck him as somewhat odd when he thought about it much later.

At the first slow words from Larick he returned his sight to normal, feeling only the physical sensations which the sounds and their echoes stirred within him. The experiences of timelessness and distancing came over him more quickly than they had on the previous occasion. Now, as he watched, the light on the surface of the towering formation began shifting. It seemed almost as if the thing were moving slightly.

Larick grew silent and some member of the circle began the intonation. The cavern slowly faded about him as this occurred. Pol felt that the huge form was the only tangible object in existence. The words followed him, however, filling this version of the universe which he now occupied. Then, suddenly, the

monolith seemed larger, its shape indefinably altered.

Another voice took up the words. Pol watched, fascinated, as the object moved and shifted its appearance. The lumpy base seemed more and more to be the knuckles of three folded fingers, the single upright a forefinger extended, a small, low prominence on its other side the joint of a bent thumb. Of course . . . It had been a hand all along. Why hadn't he noticed sooner?

The voice moved nearer. The hand was indeed stirring, turning in his direction. The finger began to dip, slowly.

His breathing ceased and a sense of awe came over him as it continued to descend toward him. The narrowing distance between them was filled with power. Unaccountably, his right shoulder and arm began to tingle.

The finger, large enough to crush him, reached — gently, delicately — and brushed very lightly against his right shoulder.

He almost collapsed, not from any weight but from the feelings which invaded him at that moment. He steadied himself as the source of the words came even nearer. The finger was retreating now, moving back toward its upright position.

The tingling continued in his arm and shoulder, to be succeeded first by a dull ache and then by a numbness when it came his turn to speak the words. The cavern returned, however, and the hand became once again a stalactite upon a rough rock.

The words went full circle, they meditated in silence for a spell and Larick then motioned them to follow him through an opening in the wall behind the rock upon which he stood.

Pol moved slowly, awkwardly, puzzled by the dead weight which hung at his right side. He reached across and seized his right biceps with his left hand.

His upper arm felt swollen, immense; it was tight against the cloth of his sleeve.

He ran his hand down his arm. The entire limb seemed suddenly grown oversize. Also, it was uniformly diminished in sensitivity. With great effort, however, he found that he could move it. When he lowered his eyes, he discovered that his hand — still normal in appearance and feeling — hung far lower than usual, in the vicinity of his knee. He felt for the power of his dragonmark, but it, too, seemed to have been numbed. Then he recalled Larick's words on the matter of transformations this night — that they should be accepted without distress and not be permitted to interfere with the business at hand. Nevertheless, he glanced surreptitiously at the others, to see whether he could detect any malformations. The few he was able to view before entering the tunnel did not exhibit any gross impairments. And no one seemed to notice his own.

They walked. The way was level, straight and sufficiently wide. The illumination persisted. They passed through an empty chamber without halting — where it seemed that a high-pitched musical tone was being constantly sounded, just beyond the bounds of audibility — and they continued until another grotto opened before them.

Here they entered. It was a rounded chamber with a curved roof, almost bubble-like in appearance. Larick spaced them about a rock formation resembling a cauldron, near its center. Again, a chanting commenced and again Pol knew the oceanic feeling, the detachment he had experienced at the other stations, though here it was mixed with something of depression, sadness. His left arm acquired the tingling sensation at this point, and when his turn had come and passed and all was done it resembled the right exactly in its transformation.

This time he accepted the change with less distress, as a part of the total experience. The others must be undergoing similar experiences, he decided. He followed them to a well-like depression across the way, discovering as he did that

sensation, mobility and control were returning to his arms.

He watched the others. A knotted rope fastened about a nearby rock hung down into the hole. One by one, the candidates took hold and climbed down it, vanishing into the darkness. When his turn came he did likewise, with great ease, pleased with the enormous strength which now resided in his arms and shoulders.

In the yellow-blue cavern to which they descended the now-familiar ritual formation was established and the rite carried out about a large, spherical crystal set upon a pedestal. Before it was concluded, Pol's left hand felt as if he had dipped it in boiling water. He gave no outward evidence of this, not even looking down upon it, until after this phase, too, was completed and Larick led them out through an opening in the wall to the left.

The hand still throbbed, but the sensation of heat had vanished. When he viewed it, he saw that it had grown massive, purplish, scaly; the nails were thick, dark, triangular, hooked, at the ends of long, powerful-looking digits which reached almost to his ankle. The robe he wore concealed much of the change within its folds, its long, wide sleeves. Still. . . He looked about again. None of the other candidates seemed to have noticed his discomfort. Again, he forced the thought of it away. He trekked after the others along a broad, level tunnel, his gait somewhat disturbed, as if by overbalancing and compensation.

A sword hung from a chain midway between floor and roof at the near end of the next chamber. This, in its turn, became the object of their meditation, swinging and glinting redly as the words circled it. The visions which swam through his mind at this, as at the previous station, barely registered themselves on his consciousness, as the feeling of the power of his new limbs came to occupy his awareness with the burning pang in his right hand — this time a thing of masochistic pleasure to him. He spoke the words in a ringing voice and did not even look down, already knowing what he would see.

When it was over, he turned and joined the line filing out through another opening and into a downward-slanting tunnel, moving now as if within a dream, his actions determined by some a-logical pattern he could feel about him, no longer wondering whether the others' notions of personal transformation coincided with his own.

The way was steep; sweet odors rose up it. The walls were a living net of pale fire. The floor sparkled, almost moistly. They continued downward for a long while, coming at last to a small chamber into which they were crowded about a simple, unadorned cube of stone. The place was strewn with flowers, accounting for the odor he had detected on the way down. Here he found the smell almost sickly sweet in its intensity. When the words were spoken in these close quarters they hurt his ears. He felt excessively warm and became very conscious of the beating of his heart. A wave of dizziness passed over him, but he knew that even if he fainted there was no place to fall, so closely were they packed together. Later, he believed that he had actually succumbed to unconsciousness briefly, for there was a gap in his memory up until he found himself speaking. It seemed that there had been another vision, one which had partly numbed his senses. He could not recall the details. His heart was beating rapidly now, with an unusually heavy throbbing. He became peripherally aware that the candidates who stood at either hand were removed a greater distance from him than they had been the last time he had been aware of their presence. The aroma of the flowers had diminished sharply, or else he had become accustomed to it.

He lowered his head as he finished speaking and saw that his robe was torn. Then he became aware of the enormous breadth of his shoulders, the barrel-like

girth of his chest. No wonder his garment was rent. How could this be illusion? He glanced at the nearest candidates. Wrapped in their own meditations, none of them seemed to be paying him any heed.

Slowly, he raised his right hand. He reached inside through the torn place, groped about until he located an opening in his own garments which lay beneath. His heavy fingers explored below them, encountering a tough, hard, bumpy surface. He explored further. From navel to neck, it felt as if he were covered with scales. He withdrew his hand and let it fall. When he looked up again, he saw that Larick was staring at him. The man looked away immediately.

When they departed the room, it was as if they followed a continuation of the tunnel which had brought them to that place, still slanting downward, headed in the same direction. He controlled his breathing carefully as they walked, for its sounds came heavy and stertorous when he drew deep breaths.

There came a cooling for which he was grateful, as they continued down the long shaft. The next chamber was much larger than the one they had quitted, its floor of a greenish stone. A heavy oil lamp was suspended by chains from its roof, and its flames waved as the words were spoken.

This time it was his left leg. The moment that the tingling began he knew what was to follow. When it finally came, he almost collapsed. The leg seemed to have grown much longer and heavier than the right one. He was almost completely unbalanced and had to keep that knee bent and the other straight. But, if anything, the dream quality he was experiencing was enhanced by this phase of the ritual progress. As they turned and he lurched his way along a mercifully level tunnel, visions, like objectified free associations, were everywhere. He could not place his hand against the swimming wall for support without seeming to touch some beast-face or a woman's breast, a flower or the feathers of a bird.

In this frame of mind, he was not even certain what he saw in the next chamber. That it was large and scented, he was aware. The images seemed everywhere dense. Zodiacal beasts moved in procession before him. If he fixed his eyes upon one, it dissolved into an entirely new series of forms. After a time, he gave up. He almost welcomed the tightening and the warmth in his right leg when it came, for his balance was finally restored when that one matched the other.

His mind a chaotic jumble now, he departed with the others, moving surely and swiftly down another long, steep way.

They came at last into a very dark chamber where stalactite and stalagmite were joined to form a towering silver pillar about which Larick led and placed them. Pol's mind cleared momentarily, and he wondered what had actually been happening and for how long the ceremony had been going on. The images were dispersed. There was only the shining pillar here, lovely and bright. With his elongated reach, he felt that he could almost extend his arms and embrace it. The thing seemed to reflect power. He felt some sort of stability returning. He raised his massive hands and stared at them. Where had he seen their like before? He adjusted his vision for the second sight, but they remained unchanged when this occurred.

He let his hands fall as the memory came to him. They were like the hands of those demonic creatures he had seen in his dreams of the land beyond the Gate. What could this mean? Why were they being objectified in this fashion during this ritual of a supposedly beneficial nature? Was this truly the sort of transformation of which Larick had spoken, or was he undergoing something else?

He raised a hand to his face, ran his fingertips across his features. They seemed unchanged, yet —

He was seized by an abdominal cramp which bent him partway forward. Involuntarily, he clutched at his midsection. In that instant, Larick began speaking again, yet another sequence of the words. He felt the pressure of his belt and unfastened it. He heard the sound of cloth tearing beneath his robe. When the pains had passed, he was aware of a widening in the pelvic area, a spreading of his hips. It was difficult when he attempted to stand fully upright. His spine now seemed to possess a curvature which bore him forward so that his hands rested upon the ground. His feet began to ache.

Then it did not matter. The moment of full rationality passed, and he was caught up in another sequence of visions and feelings of power. It seemed that a very long time had passed. His mind drifted through the repetitions and his own part in them. When they moved again, he followed, slouched far forward, oblivious and ignored.

Larick led them to an opening in the floor through which the top of a ladder protruded. He motioned for them to follow after and proceeded to descend it.

Pol waited until all of the others had gone down before beginning his own clumsy descent.

The ladder creaked beneath him and one rung came loose. But he clutched its sides tightly and kept going. It was a long descent, finally taking him directly into the midst of the others, who stood within a circle drawn upon the floor of this chamber. He noted that two of the other candidates had collapsed and that Larick was kneeling, massaging the chest of one of them.

He jumped down the final few feet and waited. The man on whom Larick had been working moaned after a time and sat up. Larick immediately moved to the other — a small, red-haired man, whose teeth seemed tightly locked together — and listened for a heartbeat. Apparently there was none, for he abandoned that one immediately and returned to the other. After several minutes, he helped that other to his feet and checked the red-haired man again. The second form remained still. Larick shook his head and rose, leaving the man where he had fallen. He motioned the others into a formation around himself, then raised both hands.

Pol's feet began to ache as the power was raised within the circle. The pain grew so severe that he had to tear off his boots seconds later. He held them beneath his arm inside the robe as the ritual progressed. He dimly recalled that this was the final stage of the initiation. Everything would be over soon and he could go somewhere and sleep . . .

He found himself saying the words, his voice normal, steady. When he had finished, he closed his eyes. An extraordinarily vivid image immediately arose. He saw Rondoval besieged, a storm raging about it. The image flowed. A man stood upon the main balcony, a black scarf about his neck, the scepter of power in his hands. His hair was frost-white save for a black streak running back through it. He was singing orders to his unearthly hordes and causing flames to rise before his enemies. But a sorcerer all in white — old Mor! — came to duel with him. The older man prevailed, the defense slackened, the man on the balcony slumped and withdrew.

Inside, he raced to a nearby chamber and began manipulating magical paraphernalia. The action was telescoped. Moments later, it seemed, scepter held high, he stood at the Circle's center, voicing words of power that rang through the room, causing a twisting, smoky shape in a corner near the ceiling to vibrate in resonance.

"Belphanior ned septut!" he cried. "Bel. . ."

The door burst open and a messenger entered and collapsed as the forces swept over him.

"The gate has been breached . . ." he said, before he expired.

The sorcerer spoke a word of protection, thrust the scepter into his sash and broke the Circle.

He departed the chamber, raced up the hall and entered another room, where he seized and braced a powerful bow which hung there. He chose a single arrow from a soft leather quiver and took it with him.

Below, Pol saw him use the weapon to slay the leader of the attacking forces. Then he fought a duel with old Mor, was bested and died, buried beneath a heap of rubble.

Things blurred. The storm had passed. The fighting had ceased. He saw Mor mounted upon the back of a centaur, riding into the west, the dead sorcerer's body tied across the back of another of the horse-people.

Another blur.

Within a cavern, illuminated by his glowing staff, planted like some unnatural tree, Mor was alone with the dead sorcerer. The body was laid on its back upon a slab of stone, arms folded. Leaning above the corpse, Mor was doing something to the face — rubbing, pressing. At some later point he raised his hands and seemed to pull the face away.

No. It was a deathmask that he held upraised, and in that moment Pol noticed how closely the features resembled those of Mor himself.

He began speaking softly, but Pol could not distinguish the words. The second seeing came over him and he beheld a fine, silver strand attached to the mask.

Everything came apart and trailed away then, as visions do.

Pol opened his eyes. Everyone was standing in meditation and there was an echoing sound in the air, Larick's hands were raised and he was clapping them together slowly, speaking certain final words.

When he had finished, Larick passed among them, stopped and raised the dead man, positioned him across his back, moved to its perimeter and broke the Circle. He turned then and gestured for the others to follow him.

They exited the chamber and moved along a widening tunnel, passing at length into a large, irregularly shaped, unadorned cavern cluttered with rock and stalagmite, hung with huge stalactites. The air there was cooler still. Pol's head began to clear.

Larick picked his way across the cavern and found a place to deposit the body. Then he returned, mounted a small prominence and addressed his followers:

"Krendel was the only candidate who succumbed to the forces," he said. "The rest of you may be said to have passed, in one fashion or another. It could be several weeks before the new alignment of your magical states has stabilized. Because of this, I caution you against any operations of the Art for a time. Things could go very much awry, with unpredictable results. Wait, rest, confine your activities to the physical plane. When you feel ready, begin your workings in a very small way — and wait after each step, to be certain that things are proceeding properly."

He turned and looked back over his shoulder. He gestured in that direction.

"That tunnel leads back into the world," he said. "It is long. I will conduct each of you up it personally, to meet the dawn."

"You will be first," he told the nearest. "Go and wait for me over there. I will join you in a moment."

He stepped down from the mound and headed toward Pol.

"Come over here," he whispered, and he led him into a side passage behind a fat stalagmite.

"Something is wrong," Pol said. "I've become a monster and no one seems to

notice."

"That is true," Larick answered, raising his voice to a normal pitch.

"Should this not pass, now the initiation is over?"

"Madwand," he replied, "your transformation had nothing to do with the initiation. Can you say you know nothing of the House of Avinconet?"

"Yes. I've never heard of it."

"Nor of the great Gate to a dark and sinister world? A Gate you would fling wide?"

Pol frowned.

"I see," Larick said, sighing. "What I did to you was indeed necessary. I took the opportunity afforded by your state of mind at each stage of the initiation to lay powerful spells upon you — exchanging your body, piece by piece, for that of one of the dwellers in that accursed place. Save, of course, for your head."

"Why?" Pol asked. "What have I done to you?"

"Personally, nothing," Larick answered. "But the evil you would work is so great that everything I have done is warranted. You will learn more of what lies before you by and by. Now I must get back to the other initiates."

Pol extended one massive, taloned hand to seize him. Larick gestured briefly and the entire limb was instantly paralyzed.

"What —"

"I have complete control of your new body," the other stated. "I have enfolded you in a series of virtually unbreakable spells. See how I lay my will upon you, totally immobilizing you now? There is also a masking spell. It even compensates for your ungainliness. Only you see yourself as you truly are — a necessary reminder, I'd say. You are now, in all ways, my creature."

"And you were so concerned about black magic," Pol said. "Perhaps you feared competition?"

Larick winced and looked away.

"It was necessary, this time," he said, "to combat a greater ill."

"Don't preach me that line. I've done nothing wrong. You have."

Larick turned away. Pol screamed at him.

His cry was cut short as the man turned back and gestured again. Now Pol could no longer speak at all.

"I'll come for you last and we will journey to Castle Avinconet," Larick said, and then he smiled. "Don't go away."

He passed the rocky corner and was gone.

POL HEARD a drop of water fall from a stalactite into a nearby pool. He heard the sounds of his own shallow breathing. He heard the distant voices of the other initiates, doubtless discussing the night's experiences.

If magic had bound him, then magic could free him, he decided. But he could not locate the sources of his own power. It seemed as if that part of him were somehow asleep. He brooded over Larick's words, over the fact that his dreams were apparently a nasty reality to someone else. He sought through his memories for some clue as to why this should be so. He wondered whether his present situation were in any way connected with the attack of the sorcerer Mouseglove had dispatched back at Rondoal. He strained to move, but no movement followed.

Then there came the sound of a footstep beyond the passage. It seemed too soon for Larick to be returning, but —

A large man, as tall but wider than Larick, turned the corner and advanced. His face was a constantly shifting thing, as if seen through a multi-phase refracting medium. The eyes drifted, the nose swelled and shrank, the mouth twisted

through ghastly parodies of human expressions. But when he opened it to speak, Pol still saw that there was a shining, capped tooth. He tried the second seeing but was unable to penetrate the distortion spell the person wore like a mask.

"I see that my disguise still holds for your features," came the familiar voice. "But what have you done with the rest?"

Pol found that he could not even snarl.

"Actually," the man went on, "that is a terrific body. You could wreak all sorts of havoc with it, if you'd a mind to. I suppose you're rather attached to your own, though, eh?"

He raised his head, one huge eye and one small one focussing upon Pol's own, shifting relative sizes even as he stared.

"Forgive me," he said then. "I'd forgotten you can't answer."

He raised one hand and slapped Pol lightly across the mouth. It stung for only a moment, and something seemed to be released with the stinging. Pol found that his jaws were unlocked, that he could move his head.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked.

"I haven't the time to tell you, even if I wished to," the other replied. "It's a long story and there are other considerations of much greater moment just now. Everything seems to be coming along nicely, though. I wouldn't worry too much."

"You call this 'nicely'?" Pol said, casting his gaze down over his monstrous form.

"Well, not necessarily from an esthetic standpoint, if you happen to be human," the man said. "I was referring to the progression of events. Larick thinks he's got you now."

"Offhand, I'd say he's right."

"That might be remedied, if you're willing to play the game out."

"I don't even know the stakes, or the rules."

"That will be a part of your reward if all goes well: answers to your questions — and answers to some you haven't even thought of yet."

"Such as who you are, and what you're after?"

"That will almost assuredly come out."

"Will I like what I discover?"

"In matters of taste, each person is of course the only judge."

"What choice have I?"

"You may act, or be acted upon."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go along with things, find out what it is that your captor desires and decide whether that is what you also want. Then you act accordingly. Larick feels that he has you under complete control, but in a moment I will break his infantile spells. I will also reverse the moderately clever body exchange he has worked upon you, restoring to you your own vigorous, youthful — if fatigued — carcass. Then will follow the work of a true master. Freed and restored, I will disguise your body as I disguised your features, giving to it in every respect the semblance of the monster you now are. For an encore, I will then cloak you in a masking spell in all ways identical to the one which now hides your hideous appearance from most mortal eyes —"

"A disguise within a disguise?"

"Precisely."

"To what end?"

"At some point, those who desire you in the reduced state will be sure to strip away the outer layer to behold the captive monster within."

The large sorcerer strode forward and clasped him by the shoulders. Instantly, Pol felt something like an electric shock pass through him. His arm dropped. He sagged forward. His boots fell to the floor from where he had clutched them beneath his left arm all this long while. The sorcerer seized that arm and an agonizing pain ran through it. Before Pol could examine it, he had hold of the other. He was humming as he worked. Whether or not this was a part of his procedure, Pol could not tell.

As he raised his hands and realized that they were indeed *his* hands again, the man struck him a mighty blow across the back with his left hand and upon the chest just above the heart with his right. Even within the well-muscled and heavily armored form that he wore, Pol could tell that the man was no weakling.

He felt the air rush out of his lungs as his chest cavity was returned to normal. He began to straighten and the sorcerer struck him a terrific blow in the abdomen, well below the belt. The change continued in that region, and he straightened fully, massaging, slapping himself, as much for the joy of feeling his own form again as to ease the omnipresent aches.

The big sorcerer kicked him in the shins and he felt the aches, straightening and shrinkage begin in his legs.

"I must say you have a violent approach to these matters," he remarked.

"Perhaps you'd prefer a six-hour incantation with incense?"

"I never argue with success."

"Prudent. I now begin the first masking spell, causing you to look as you just were."

The illusion began, growing like a gray mist about him, shaped by the flowing gestures of the face-changer's hands. Pol felt his hidden dragonmark throb in the presence of this magic. Soon it cloaked him completely, coalescing, sinking through his garments.

The sorcerer sighed and straightened.

"... And that will be all they see, if they pierce your outer guise, soon to be supplied by me. I must caution you concerning the obvious, however."

"That being?"

"You must act as if you are still under control. Be standing paralyzed in the same position in which he left you when Larick returns. Follow all of his orders as if you had no choice. The moment you deviate, you lose your chance to learn anything further. You will probably also have a fight on your hands."

Pol nodded. He looked down at himself as he did, seeing the monstrous appearance once again but not feeling it.

"I'll mask this illusion for everyone else now, as Larick had it," the sorcerer said, "but leave the appearance for you, as he also had it, as a reminder to act in keeping with it — with clumsiness and obedience."

Pol watched the man's hands as they commenced an intricate series of gestures.

"Do you see strands when you work?" he asked him suddenly.

"Sometimes," the sorcerer replied. "But right now I see beams of colored light, which I intercept. Hush. I'm concentrating."

Pol fixed his eyes on the man's changing face, trying to guess at his true features. But there was no pattern to the changes.

When the movements ceased and the man straightened, Pol said, "You told me on that night you came to me in our camp that our interests might not be entirely conjoined."

"Oh, there is a possibility that we might wind up at odds," the other replied. "I hope not, but there you are. It could happen. If so, it won't be because I didn't try,

though. And at least for the moment we want the same thing: to get you out of here intact, to deceive your enemies, to position you strategically."

"Have you any idea what will happen when I leave here?"

"Oh, yes. You will be spirited away almost immediately — to Castle Avin-conet."

"Larick did say that much. But who else is involved? And what will I meet at that end?"

"It is far better for you to learn these things yourself, to keep your responses normal."

"Damn it! There's more to it than that! You're hiding something!"

"In what way does that make me different from other men? Play your part, boy. Play your part."

"Don't patronize me. I need more information to carry this thing off."

"Bullshit," the sorcerer replied and turned away. "And strike your pose again. I believe I hear someone coming."

"But—"

"The rest is silence," the changing man said, as he vanished around the corner.

MOUSEGLOVE HUNKERED in a rocky recess to the left of the cavemouth, his hood raised and cloak drawn about him against the morning's chill. To his right, the fresh-risen sun constructed morning above the foothills, skimming a layer of glory from the magical city he had quitted hours before. Eight of the initiates had so far passed him, each in the company of Larick, to salute the dawn, then make their ways back toward the town, alone, or in the company of a servant or a former master. When he heard footsteps once again, Mouseglove stirred slightly, turning his head toward the opening. When he saw Pol approaching with the leader, he rose, joints creaking, but did not immediately depart his station.

Unlike those who had preceded him, Pol had already removed his white robe. His gait was slower and more awkward than usual. Larick, too, was dressed only in his day garments and head cloth. His face bore a far less solemn aspect than it had when he was bringing the others forth from Belken. He was snapping orders at Pol as they emerged. The two immediately turned to their left and began walking quickly in that direction.

Puzzled, Mouseglove stepped out from his niche and hurried after them.

"Good morning," he said. "How did you fare during the night?"

Larick almost stumbled in halting, and he placed his hand upon Pol's arm. By the time he turned, his face was composed. Pol, moving more slowly, was without expression.

"Good morning," Larick replied. "Your friend is well enough physically, but some who go through initiation experience mental disorganization in varying degrees. This has occurred with him."

"How serious is this thing?"

"That depends upon a great many factors — but it is generally treatable. I was hurrying him off right now with that end in mind."

"That is why you skipped the dawn salutation?"

Larick's eyes narrowed for the briefest moment, as if assessing the other's knowledge of the matters involved.

"We were not going to dispense with it entirely," he said. "But perhaps you are right, since this is the traditional spot."

He turned toward the place where the others had stood to perform the final ritual function.

"Pol! Do you at least understand me?" Mouseglove said.

Larick turned back.

"I am certain that he does," he told him. "But, technically, he should not address anyone until he has finished with this part of things. You can see in a few minutes what his response will be."

He led Pol over to the place, speaking softly and rapidly to him. Mouseglove shifted about, glancing in every direction. A little later, he saw Pol raise his arms and lift his face toward the light in the east. As Pol began to mutter, Larick moved a short distance away from him. Mouseglove watched carefully, hands beneath his cloak.

When Pol had completed a hurried version of the sun-rite, he turned toward the smaller man.

"It may not be all that serious," he said then. "But I must go away with Larick for a time. I can afford to take no chances in something like this."

"How long?"

"I do not know. For as long as is necessary."

"It could take a week or two," Larick put in. "Possibly even longer."

"Where is it that you are taking him? I'm going with."

"I couldn't tell you that until I have conferred with some experts. Perhaps he can be treated here. Then again, he may have to go away."

"Where?"

"That remains to be determined."

"Pol," Mouseglove said, "are you certain that this is what you want to do?"

"Yes," Pol replied.

"Very well. We will go and find out. If it is to be here, I will wait. If it is to be elsewhere, I will accompany you."

"That will not be necessary," Pol said, and he turned away. "I don't need you."

"Nevertheless. . ."

"You are an encumbrance!" Larick said, and he raised his hand.

Mouseglove moved, but not fast enough. All strength and sensation fled his limbs. He fell, his hand still gripping the butt of the pistol he had been unable to draw.

FOR SOME TIME before he opened his eyes, Mouseglove was marginally aware of a slow, intermittent, shuffling sound. When finally he did open them, his field of vision was occupied by a small, gray, mossy rock and a scattering of gravel. He noted that the day had grown perceptibly brighter.

He moved his left hand slowly, placing its palm flat upon the ground near to his shoulder. It remained there for long seconds before he became aware of the coldness of the stone. The shuffling sound came again and he raised his head a few inches, suddenly aware of a stiffness in his neck. He pushed hard with the hand, heaving himself upward, rolling into a seated position, fighting a tendency to slump forward. As his gaze moved across the area, passing the place where Pol and Larick had stood, his memory of the morning's events poured into his mind. He turned his head to the east. The station of the sun told him that an hour or more had passed since that encounter. He rehearsed the entire exchange, seeking clues as to what had occurred within the mountain and what might now be afoot. He resolved that the next time he argued with a sorcerer he would have the weapon drawn and pointed at its target, the hammer set, his finger upon the trigger.

A series of small sounds reached him from within the cave, turning itself into several rapid footfalls and then halting. He drew one knee beneath him and push-

ed himself up into a crouch. He rose slowly as the footfalls came again, nearing the mouth of the cave. He drew the weapon and pointed it at the opening, the hammer making a clicking sound as he set it.

The steps grew stronger, steadier. A moment later, a small, red-haired man appeared within the opening. He was wearing a dirt-streaked white robe. He leaned against the rock, eyes rolling and blinking, head turning. When his gaze swept over Mouseglove, it did not pause. His complexion was dead white. He twitched and jerked, as though he were having a minor seizure.

Mouseglove watched him closely for a long while before he spoke.

"What is the matter?" he asked, weapon still steady.

The head rolled again, the eyes passing over him, then back again, back again, their orbit narrowing, a rapid scanning motion. At last, they seemed to focus upon him, but the look they held caused him to suppress a shudder.

"What is the matter?" he repeated.

The man took a step forward, raised a pale hand, opened his mouth and inserted the fingers. He made a gargling noise, then withdrew his fingers slightly, pinching the tip of his tongue. He took another step, released the tongue, held both hands at shoulder level. He took another step, and another, his right hand moving from side to side, gradually reaching forward. He continued to make gasping, rattling noises, and his tread grew more steady.

"Hold it!" Mouseglove said. "What do you want?"

The man roared at him and rushed forward.

"Stop!" Mouseglove cried, and when the man did not he pulled the trigger.

The round struck the man in the left arm, turning him sideways. He swayed for a moment, then dropped to his knees, making no effort to reach for the area of impact. He rose again almost immediately, turning back toward Mouseglove, voicing a new series of gutturals.

"Don't make me shoot again," Mouseglove said, setting the hammer. "I recognize you. I know you're one of the candidates. Just tell me what you want."

The man kept coming, and Mouseglove fired again.

The man jerked and was turned sideways again, but this time he did not fall. He straightened and resumed his progress, his steady stream of sounds acquiring more and more inflection.

"Aaalll-right. . . " he said.

Mouseglove licked his lips as he readied the weapon once more.

"For gods' sakes, stop!" he cried. "I don't want to do this to you!"

"Not im-por-tant. Listenlistenlistenlisten," the other said, face totally devoid of expression, eyes still rolling, hands still extended and twitching.

Mouseglove backed off three paces, but the other hastened once more. Mouseglove halted then and shot him squarely in the chest.

The man was jolted by the blow. He fell backward, caught himself in a seated position and began to rise again.

"No!" Mouseglove cried. "Please! Stop!"

"Stop," the man repeated without emotion. "Listen, listen, listen. Pol. Im-por-tant. You."

"Pol?" Mouseglove said, cocking the weapon again. "What about him?"

"Yes. Pol. Yes. You un-der-stand — me — now. Yes?"

"Then stay put and tell me! Don't come any nearer!"

Slowly, the other rose again, and something which had registered without Mouseglove's realizing it, came into his consciousness at that moment.

The man was not bleeding from any of his wounds. The garment was torn, darkened, slightly damp-looking where each round had penetrated — but there

were no bright red splotches.

"Stay — put?" he said. "Stand — here?"

"Yes. You make me very nervous. I can hear you clearly. Tell me from there. What about Pol?"

"Pol. . . " said the other, swaying. "In trouble, Mouse-glove. Listen."

"I am listening. What sort of trouble is it?"

"Larick — placed him — under a spell."

"What sort of spell? I'll find someone who can lift it."

"Not necessary. It has been removed. But Larick — does not — know this."

"Then Pol's mind is all right?"

"As always."

"But Larick thinks he is under a spell?"

"Yes. As Pol wishes."

"Where is he taking him?"

"Castle Avinconet."

"That's Ryle Merson's place! I might have known. I will go there and help him in whatever he is about."

"Not yet. You would be of little help and likely be destroyed. There is a better course of action."

"Name it."

"Go to Pol's patron."

"Ibal?"

"That one. Tell him what has occurred. Ask him for speedy transportation back to Rondoval."

"Say he grants it. What then?"

"You can speak with dragons."

"I'm afraid so."

"Tell the old one — Moonbird — to take you to the dead crater on Anvil Mountain and there help you to recover the magical tool."

"The scepter?"

"Yes."

"Say this can be done."

"Then take it to Pol at Avinconet."

"He will be all right in the meantime?"

"They may see fit to destroy him at any time. I do not know. If they do not, however, he may well need it soon."

"Who are you?"

"I do not know."

"How do you know all these things?"

"I was there."

"Why do you wish to help Pol?"

"I am uncertain."

"How is it that I could not kill you?"

"A corpse cannot die."

"Now it is I who do not understand."

"You know enough. Good-bye."

The red-haired man collapsed and lay still. Mouseglove approached him cautiously. There was no sign of breathing, and he considered the man's waxy pallor at closer range. He reached out and touched a cheek. It was cold. He raised the right hand. It was cold, also; and a certain stiffness had already come into the limb. He pressed upon the fingernails one after the other. They all grew white and remained so. Finally, he leaned forward and lay his ear upon the chest near

to the bullet hole. He discovered it to be a quiet place.

He arranged the body, crossing the arms upon the breast. He drew the white cowl up over the head and down across the face. He rose and moved away.

Crossing to the place where Pol and Larick had stood, he located their tracks and began following them. They disappeared quickly, however, in the rocky terrain. He halted there and spent several minutes pondering. Then he turned to the city of illusion and began his descent toward its flickering towers. ●

Roger Zelazny

One of the leading New Wave writers during the '60s, Roger Zelazny helped elevate sf to higher literary planes, exploring experimental narrative techniques, intense themes and challenging backgrounds while plumbing the psyches of his characters. Never sticking to any one category of the genre, he continues to surprise and delight his multitudinous fans (themselves often devoted to one category or another) with his immensely readable, engrossing and entertaining fiction. He has over 90 short stories and articles to his credit which have appeared in all the major magazines and more, plus 28 books, including one special limited edition recently published by Norstrilia Press, When Pussywillows Last in the Catyard Bloomed, and Other Poems. He has received the coveted "Hugo" award three times — 1966, 1968 and 1976 — for

And Call Me Conrad (novel), Lord of Light (novel) and "Home is the Hangman" (novella). His fellow members of the Science Fiction Writers of America have bestowed their highest honor, the "Nebula," on him three times — twice in 1966 and once in 1976 — for "He Who Shapes" (novella), "The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth" (novelette) and "Home is The Hangman." Other distinctions include the "Prix Apollo," 1972 for the French edition of Isle of the Dead; the "Balrog" award, 1980, short fiction category, for "The Last Defender of Camelot"; plus his Doorways in the Sand was selected by the American Library Association as one of the "Best Books for Young Adults" published in 1976. — Ed

Designer Kids

In the future, a magnate of means,
Who desires "that look" for his teens,
If he knows the score,
Then some years before,
He'll purchase some Vanderbilt genes.

— Scott Edelman

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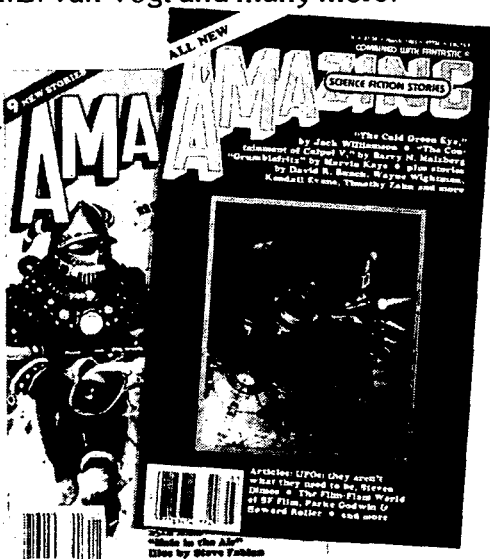
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Harlan Ellison the DISCARDED

Introduction

THE ORIGINAL manuscript title of this story was "No Room in Space." When it was first published in *Fantastic* (which was *Amazing's* monthly companion magazine from May 1939 — when it was called *Fantastic Adventures* — until last year when it merged with the magazine you're now holding) it bore the title "The Abnormals." It was the cover story of the April 1959 All-Star Issue that also contained work by Jack Williamson, Kate Wilhelm, Gordon Dickson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Edward Wellen, the late Rog Phillips, Jack Sharkey

and the Porges brothers. At the helm was the remarkable Cele Goldsmith, one of the great unsung science fiction editors, she who was responsible for buying the earliest work of Zelazny, Wilhelm, Disch, Le Guin and too many others who became stars to go into here. (But *Amazing* ought to do an interview with her, about those days at Ziff-Davis. Now that would be a read!)

I was in the Army at the time. I'd been inducted early in 1957, wrote my first novel in basic training, saw it published while I was serving my time at Fort Knox, Ken-

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tucky, and to support a wife had to keep writing while soldiering. I wrote better than I soldiered.

In December of 1958, living off-post at 434 Washington Street in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, I wrote "No Room in Space" and sent it off to Cele. She bought it for a penny a word, fifty bucks for 5000 words, and liked it well enough to give it the cover illustration on the "All-Star Issue."

The cover, one of Ed Valigursky's most memorably unattractive efforts, showed three portraits of mutants in cameo frames. Cele had changed the name of the story to "The Abnormals" and ran it first-up in the book. Between the moronic cover and the presence of so much high-powered talent in that issue, I had no expectation of the story ever being remembered.

But apparently there's a resonance in this work that many people respond to. It was included in my 1965 collection, *PAINGOD And Other Delusions*; it has been translated and reprinted in French, Spanish, Japanese, German, Belgian, Dutch, Norwegian and Hebrew; since its 1971 appearance in my collection *ALONE AGAINST TOMORROW* it has never been out of print; it was reprinted in a pirate edition of my stories by a former publisher of this magazine; it has been done in pictorial form in *THE ILLUSTRATED ELLISON* (with an absolutely astonishing cover painting by Michael Whelan that captures the look of the damned souls in this story more perfectly than ever I had imagined them); it has twice been optioned for motion picture adaptation, though nothing's come of it; and when they select stories of mine for illustrated portfolios, they invariably include "The Discarded."

Several years ago I managed to regain some lost original manuscripts that had been published in the Ziff-Davis editions of *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. One of them was "The Discarded," all yellowed and funky looking. At the top, in pencil, in Cele Goldsmith's hand, the word *Amazing* appears. It has been crossed off and in ink beside it Cele wrote "April *Fantastic*."

So at last, twenty-two years later, this story has found its way into the original magazine for which it was intended. Only better. Because I was twenty-four years old when I wrote the story and I've revised it somewhat for this appearance. And because you don't have to look at that vile cover.

One more little sidelight about "The Discarded":

When I do public lectures I'm often asked to explain this story or that story... what did you mean by the ending of "Jeffy is Five"... doesn't what happens to Quilla June in "A Boy and His Dog" show that you hate women... where did the Harlequin get the jelly beans? The usual moronic questions from people with slovenly reading habits.

But not until last December, at Erie Community College in Williamsville, New York, did I get asked one of those questions about "The Discarded." You see, I always thought this story was one of my most accessible; as clear as the mild breeze that blows between Ronald Reagan's ears. But a guy came up to me after my talk and he asked me something like this: "Isn't 'The Discarded' supposed to be an analogy for the way the System brutalizes the Common Man? We discussed it in class and some people saw it as a positive statement about how multinational corporations are running our lives, but I saw it as a brutalization of the Common Man. Which is it?"

Now, I usually run a fast ramadoola on people who ask me questions with the answers already built in, choose A or B and confirm my perceptions. But this was a nice kid, and he clearly wasn't being a wiseass, so I decided to tell him the truth about what this story means and why I wrote it. And this is what I told him:

I was in the Army at the time. I'd been inducted early in 1957, wrote my first novel in basic training, saw it published while I was serving my time at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and to support a wife had to keep writing while soldiering. I wrote better than I soldiered.

I had a Top Sergeant named Bedzyk. I liked him a lot. I had a 1st Lieutenant named Curran. I wasn't quite as fond of him. To pick up extra money I was writing and recording radio commercials for a used car lot on Dixie Highway owned by Sam Swope. I wanted to preserve them in fiction, not as they were, but as I wanted to remember them so they didn't fade away as the bulk of casual acquaintances one meets in one's life pass away when their immediate relation to your life vanishes. So I made them characters in a story I wrote for fifty bucks to pay the rent and feed myself and my wife.

I had no thought of the Common Man or

the System. At least I had no conscious thoughts of that sort. On the other hand, I was suffering the torments of Hell under the boot of the System called the U.S. Army.

So maybe that kid from Erie Community College wasn't so far off the mark. Who the hell knows?

— Harlan Ellison

Bedzyk saw Riila go mad, and watched her throw herself against the lucite port, till her pinhead was a red blotch of pulped flesh and blood. He sighed, and sucked deeply from his massive bellows chest, and wondered how he, of all the Discards, had been silently nominated the leader. The ship hung in space, between the Moon and Earth, unwanted, unnoticed, a raft adrift in the sea of night.

Around him in the ship's saloon, the others watched Riila killing herself, and when her body fell to the rug, they turned away, allowing Bedzyk his choice of who was to dispose of her. He chose John Smith — the one with feathers where hair should have been — and the nameless one who clanged instead of talking.

The two of them lifted her heavy body, with its tiny pea of a head, and carried her to the garbage port. They emptied it, opened it, tossed her inside, redogged and blew her out. She floated past the saloon window on her way sunward. In a moment she was lost.

Bedzyk sat down in a deep chair and drew breath whistlingly into his mighty chest. It was a chore, being leader of these people.

People? No, that was certainly not the word. These Discards. That was a fine willowy word to use. They were scrap, refuse, waste, garbage. How fitting for Riila to have gone that way, out the garbage port. They would *all* bid goodbye that way some day. He noted there was no 'day' on the ship. But some good *something* — maybe day, maybe night — each of them would go sucking out that port like the garbage.

It had to be that way. They were Discards.

But people? No, they were not people. People did not have hooks where hands should have been, nor one eye, nor carapaces, nor humps on chests and backs, nor fins, nor any of the other mutations these residents of the ship sported. People were normal. Evenly matched sets of arms and legs and eyes. Evenly matched husbands, wives. Evenly distributed throughout the Solar System, and evenly dividing the goods of the System between themselves and the frontier worlds at the Edge. And all happily disposed to let the obscene Discards die in their prison ship.

"She's gone."

He had pursed his lips, had sunk his perfectly normal head onto his gigantic chest, and had been thinking. Now he looked up at the speaker. It was John Smith, with feathers where hair should have been.

"I said: she's gone."

Bedzyk nodded without replying. Riila had been just one more. Pro forma. They had already lost over two hundred Discards from the ship. There would be more.

Strange how these — he hesitated again to use the word *people*, finally settled on the word they used among themselves: *creatures* — these *creatures* had steel-ed themselves to the death of one of their kind. Or perhaps they did not consider the rest as malformed as themselves. Each person on the ship was different. No two had been affected by the Sickness in the same way. The very fibers of the muscles had altered with some of these creatures, making their limbs useless; on others the pores had clogged on their skin surfaces, eliminating all hair. On still others strange juices had been secreted in the blood stream, causing weird

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growths to erupt where smoothness had been. But perhaps each one thought he was less hideous than the others. It was conceivable. Bedzyk knew his great chest was not nearly as unpleasant to look upon as, say, Samswope's spiny crest and twin heads. *In fact, Bedzyk mused wryly, many people might think it was becoming, this great wedge of a chest, all matted with dark hair and heroic-seeming. Uh-huh, the others are pretty miserable to look at, but not me, especially.* Yes, it was conceivable.

In any case, they paid no attention now, if one of their group killed himself. They turned away; most of them were better off dead, anyhow.

Then he caught himself.

He was starting to get like the rest of them! He had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't right. No one should be allowed to take death like that. He resolved: the next one would be stopped, and he would deliver them a stern warning, and tell the Discards that they would find landfall soon, and to buck up.

But he knew he would sit and watch the next time, as he had this time. For he had made the same resolve before Riila had gone.

Samswope came into the saloon — he had been on KP all 'day' and both his heads were dripping with sweat — and picked his way among the conversing groups of Discards to the seat beside Bedzyk.

"Mmm." It was a greeting; he was identifying his arrival.

"Hi, Sam. How was it?"

"Metsoo-metz," he said, imitating Scalomina (the one-eyed ex-plumber, of Sicilian descent), tipping his hand in an obvious Scalominian gesture. "I'll live. Unfortunately." He added the last word with only a little drop of humor.

"Did I ever tell you the one about the Candy-Ass Canadian Boil-Sucker?" He didn't even smile as he said it; with either head. Bedzyk nodded wearily: he didn't want to play that game. "Yeah, well," Samswope said wearily. He sat silently for several long moments, then added, with irony, "But did I tell you I was married to her?" His wife had turned him in.

Morbidity ran knee-deep on the ship.

"Riila killed herself a little bit ago," Bedzyk said carelessly. There was no other way to say it.

"I figured as much," Samswope said. "I saw them carrying her past the galley to the garbage lock. That's number six this week alone. You going to do anything, Bedzyk?"

Bedzyk abruptly twisted in his chair. He leveled a gaze at a spot directly between Samswope's two heads. His words were bitter with helplessness and anger that the burden should be placed upon him. "What do you mean, what am I going to do? I'm a prisoner here too. When they had the big roundup, I got snatched away from a wife and three kids, the same as you got pulled away from your used car lot. What the hell do you want me to do? Beg them not to bash their heads against the lucite, it'll smear our nice north view of space?"

Samswope wiped both hands across his faces simultaneously in a weary pattern. The blue eyes of his left head closed, and the brown eyes of his right head blinked quickly. His left head, which had been speaking, nodded onto his chest. His right head, the nearly-dumb one, mumbled incoherently — Samswope's left head jerked up, and a look of disgust and hatred clouded his eyes. "Shut up you — fucking moron!" He cracked his right head with a full fist.

Bedzyk watched without pity. The first time he had seen Samswope flail himself — would flagellate be a better term? — he had pitied the mutant. But it was a constant thing now, the way Samswope took his agony out on the dumb head. And there were times Bedzyk thought Samswope was better off than most.

At least he had a release valve, an object of hate.

"Take it easy, Sam. Nothing's going to help us, not a single, lousy th—"

Samswope snapped a look at Bedzyk, then catalogued the thick arms and huge chest of the man, and wearily murmured: "Oh, I don't know, Bedzyk, I don't know." He dropped his left head onto his hands. The right one winked at Bedzyk with the archness of an imbecile. Bedzyk shuddered and looked away.

"If only we could have made that landing on Venus," Samswope intoned from the depths of his hands. "If only they'd let us in."

"You ought to know by now, Sam, there's no room for us in the System at all. No room on Earth and nowhere else. They've got allocations and quotas and assignments. So many to Io, so many to Callisto, so many to Luna and Venus and Mars and anyplace else you might want to settle down. No room for Discards. No room in space, at all."

Across the saloon three fish-men, their heads encased in bubbling clear helmets, had gotten into a squabble, and two of them were trying to open the pet-cock on the third's helmet. This was something else again; the third fish-man was struggling, he didn't want to die gasping. This was not a suicide, but a murder, if they let it go unchecked.

Bedzyk leaped to his feet and hurled himself at the two attacking fish-men. He caught one by the bicep and spun him. His fist was half-cocked before he realized one solid blow would shatter the water-globe surrounding the fish-face, would kill the mutant. Instead, he took him around and shoved him solidly by the back of the shoulders toward the compartment door. The fish-man stumbled away, breathing bubbly imprecations into his life water, casting furious glances back at his companions. The second fish-man came away of his own accord and followed the first from the saloon.

Bedzyk helped the last fish-man to a relaxer and watched disinterestedly as the mutant let a fresh supply of air bubbles into the circulating water in the globe. The fish-man mouthed a lipless thanks, and Bedzyk passed it away with a gesture. He went back to his seat.

Samswope was massaging the dumb head. "Those three'll never grow up."

Bedzyk fell into the chair. "You wouldn't be too happy living inside of a goldfish bowl yourself, Swope."

Samswope stopped massaging the wrinkled yellow skin of the dumb head, seemed prepared to snap a retort, but a blip and clear-squawk from the intercom stopped him.

"Bedzyk! Bedzyk, you down there?" It was the voice of Harmony Teat up in the drive room. Why was it they always called *him*? Why did they persist in making him their arbiter?

"Yeah, I'm here, in the saloon. What's up?"

The squawk-box blipped again and Harmony Teat's mellow voice came to him from the ceiling. "I just registered a ship coming in on us, off about three-thirty. I checked through the ephemeris and the shipping schedules. Nothing supposed to be out there. What should I do? You think it's a customs ship from Earth?"

Bedzyk heaved himself to his feet. He sighed. "No, I don't think it's a customs ship. They threw us out, but I doubt if they have the imagination or gall to extract tithe from us for being here. I don't know what it might be, Harmony. Hold everything and record any signals they send. I'm on my way upship."

He strode quickly out of the saloon, and up the cross-leveled ramps toward the drive room. Not till he had passed the hydroponics level did he realize Samswope was behind him. "I, uh, thought I'd come along, Bed," Samswope said apologetically, wringing his small, red hands. "I didn't want to stay down there

with those — those freaks.”

His dumb head hung off to one side, sleeping fitfully.

Bedzyk did not answer. He turned on his heel and continued updecks, not looking back.

There was no trouble. The ship identified itself when it was well away. It was an Attache Carrier from System Central in Butte, Montana, Earth. The supercargo was a SpecAttache named Curran. When the ship pulled alongside the Discard vessel and jockeyed for grappling position, Harmony Teat (her long grey-green hair reaching down past the spiked projections on her spinal column) threw on the attract field for that section of the hull. The Earth ship clunked against the Discard vessel, and the locks were synched in.

Curran came across without a suit.

He was a slim, incredibly tanned young man with a crewcut clipped so short a patch of nearly-bald showed at the center of his scalp. His eyes were alert and his manner was brisk and friendly, that of the professional dignitary in the Foreign Service.

Bedzyk did not bother with amenities.

“What do you want?”

“Who may I be addressing, sir, if I may ask?” Curran was the perfect model of diplomacy.

“Bedzyk is what I was called on Earth.” Cool, disdainful, I-may-be-hideous-but-I-still-have-a-little-pride.

“My name is Curran, Mr. Bedzyk. Alan Curran of System Central. I’ve been asked to come out and speak to you about—”

Bedzyk settled against the bulkhead opposite the lock, not even offering the attache an invitation to return to the saloon.

“You want us to get out of your sky, is that it? You stinking lousy...” He faltered in fury. He was so angry he couldn’t even finish the sentence. “You set off too many bombs down there, and eventually some of us with something in our bloodstreams react to it, and we turn into monsters. What do you do... you call it the Sickness and you pack us up whether we want to go or not, and you shove us into space.”

“Mr. Bedzyk, I—”

“You *what*? You damned well *what*, Mr. System Central? With your straight, clean body and your nice home on Earth, and your allocations of how many people live where, to keep the balance of culture just so! You *what*? You want to invite us to leave? Okay, we’ll go!” He was nearly screeching, his face crimson with emotion, his big hands knotted at his sides for fear he would strike this emissary.

“We’ll get out of your sky. We’ve been all the way out to the Edge, Mr. Curran, and there’s no room in space for us anywhere. They won’t let us land even on the frontier worlds where we can pay our way. Oh no; contamination, they think. Okay, don’t shove, Curran, we’ll be going.”

He started to turn away, was nearly down the passageway, when Curran’s solid voice stopped him: “Bedzyk!”

The wedge-chested man turned. Curran was unsticking the seam that sealed his jumper top. He pulled it open and revealed his chest.

It was covered with leprous green and brown sores. His face was a blasted thing, then. He was a man with Sickness, who wanted to know how he had acquired it — how he could be rid of it. On the ship, they called Curran’s particular deformity ‘the runnies.’

Bedzyk walked back slowly, his eyes never leaving Curran’s face. “They sent

you to talk to us?" Bedzyk asked, wondering.

Curran resealed the jumper, and nodded. He laid a hand on his chest, as though wishing to be certain the sores would not run off and leave him. A terror swam brightly in his young eyes.

"It's getting worse down there, Bedzyk. There are more and more changing every day. I've never seen anything like it—"

He hesitated, shuddered.

He ran a hand over his face, and swayed slightly, as though whatever memory he now clutched to himself was about to make him faint. "I-I'd like to sit down."

Bedzyk took him by the elbow, and led him a few steps toward the saloon. Then Dresden, the girl with the glass hands — who wore monstrous cotton-filled gloves — came out from the connecting passage leading to the saloon, and Bedzyk thought of the hundred weird forms Curran would have to face. In his condition that would be bad. He turned the other way, and led Curran back up to the drive room. Bedzyk waved at a control chair. "Have a seat."

Curran looked collegiate-boy shook up. He sank into the chair, again touching his chest in disbelief. "I've been like this for over two months. . . they haven't found out yet; I've tried to keep myself from showing it. . ."

He was shivering wildly.

Bedzyk perched on the shelf of the plot-tank, and crossed his legs. He folded his arms across his huge chest and looked at Curran. "What do they want down there? What do they want from their beloved Discards?" He savored the last word with the taste of alum.

"It's, it's so bad you won't believe it, Bedzyk." He ran a hand through his crewcut, nervously. "We thought we had the Sickness licked. There was every reason to believe the atmosphere spray Terra Pharmaceuticals developed would end it. They sprayed the entire planet, but something they didn't even know was in the spray, and something they only half-suspected in the Sickness combined, and produced a healthier strain.

"That was when it started getting bad. What had been a hit-and-miss thing. — with just a few like yourselves, with some weakness in your bloodstreams making you susceptible — became a rule instead of an exception. People started changing while you watched. He faltered again, shuddered at a memory.

"My fiancée, he said, looking at his attache case and his hands, "I was eating lunch with her in Rockefeller Plaza's Skytop. We had to be back at work in Butte in twenty minutes, just time to catch a cab, and she-she-changed while we were sitting there. Her eyes, they, they — I can't explain it, you can't know what it was like seeing them water and run down her ch-cheeks like that, it was—" His face tightened up as though he were trying to keep himself from going completely insane.

Bedzyk sharply curbed the hysteria. "We have seven people like that on board right now. I know what you mean. And they aren't the worst. Go on, you were saying?"

Such prosaic acceptance of the horror brought Curran's frenzy down. "It got so bad everyone was staying in the sterile shelters. The streets always empty; it was horrible. Then some quack physician out in Cincinnati or somewhere like that came up with an answer. A serum made from a secretion in the bloodstreams of—"

Bedzyk added the last word for him: "Of Discards?"

Curran nodded soberly.

Bedzyk's hard-edged laugh rattled against Curran's thin film of calm. A furious expression came over his face.

"What are you laughing at? We need your help! We need all you people as blood donors."

Bedzyk stopped laughing. "Why not use the changed ones from down there?" He jerked a thumb at the big lucite viewport where Earth hung swollen and multicolored. "What's wrong with them—" and he added with malice "—with you?" Curran twitched as he realized he could so easily be lumped in with the afflicted.

"We're no good. We were changed by this new mutated Sickness. The secretion is different in our blood than it is in yours. You were stricken by the primary Sickness, or virus, or whatever they call it. We have a secondary strain. But the way research has outlined it, the only ones who have what we need, are you Dis—" he caught himself "—you people who were shipped out before the Sickness mutated."

Bedzyk snorted contemptuously. He let a wry, astonished smirk tickle his lips. "You Earthies are fantastic." He shook his head in private amusement.

He slipped off the plot-tank's ledge and turned to the port, talking half to himself, half to a nonexistent third person in the drive room. "These fuckers are unbelievable! Can you imagine, can you picture it?" Astonishment rang in his disbelief at the proposal. "First they hustle us into a metal prison and shoot us out here to die alone, they don't want any part of us, go away they say. Then when the trouble comes to them too big, they run after us, can you help us please, you dirty, ugly things, help us nice clean Earthies." He spun suddenly. "Get out of here! Get off this ship! We won't help you.

"You have your allotments and your quotas for each world—"

Curran broke in, "Yes, that's it. If the population goes down much more . . . they've been killing themselves . . . riots . . . it's terrible . . . then the balance will be changed; and our entire System culture will bend and fall and—"

Bedzyk cut him off, finishing what he had been saying, "—yes, you have your dirty little quotas, but you have no room for us. Well, we've got no room for you! Now get the hell off this ship. We don't want to help you!"

Curran leaped to his feet. "You can't send me away like this! You don't speak for all of them aboard. You can't treat a Terran emissary this way—" Bedzyk had him by the jumper, and had propelled him toward the closed companionway door before the attache knew what was happening. He hit the door and rebounded. As he stumbled back toward Bedzyk, the great-chested mutant snatched the briefcase from beside the control chair and slammed it into Curran's stomach. "Here! Here's your offer and your lousy demands, and get off this ship! We don't want any part of y—"

The door crashed open, and the Discards were there.

They filled the corridor, as far back as the angle where cross-passages ran off toward the saloon and galley. They shoved and nudged each other to get a view into the drive room; Samswope and Harmony Teat and Dresden were in the front, and from somewhere Samswope had produced an effectively deadly little rasp-pistol. He held it tightly, threateningly, and Bedzyk felt flattered that they had come to his aid.

"You don't need that, Sam — Mr. Curran was just leav—"

Then he realized. The rasp was pointed not at Curran, but at him.

He stood frozen, one hand still clutching Curran's sleeve, as Curran bellied the briefcase to himself.

"Dresden overheard it all, Mr. Curran," Samswope said in a pathetically ingratiating tone. "He wants us to rot on this barge." He gestured at Bedzyk with his free hand as the dumb head nodded certain agreement. "What offer can you

make us, can we go home, Mr. Curran . . . ?" There was a whimpering and a pleading in Samswope's voice that Bedzyk had only *sensed* before.

He tried to break in, "Are you insane, Swope? Putty, that's all you are! Putty when you see a fake hope that you'll get off this ship! Can't you see they just want to use us? Can't you understand that?"

Samswope's face grew florid and he screamed, "Shut up! Just shut up and let Curran talk! We don't want to die on this ship. You may like it, you little tin god, but we hate it here! So shut up and let him talk!"

Curran spoke rapidly then: "If you allow us to send a medical detachment up here to use you as blood donors, I have the word of the System Central that you will all be allowed to land on Earth and we'll have a reservation for you so you can live some kind of normal lives again—"

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" Bedzyk again burst in, trying vainly to speak over the hubbub from the corridor. "Can't you see he's lying? They'll use us and then desert us again!"

Samswope growled menacingly, "If you don't shut up I'll kill you, Bedzyk!"

Bedzyk faltered into silence and watched the scene before him. They were melting. They were going to let this rotten turncoat emissary blind them with false hopes.

"We've worked our allotments around so there's space for you, perhaps in the new green-valleys of South America or on the veldtland in Rhodesia. It will be wonderful, but we need your blood, we need your help."

"Don't trust him! Don't believe him, you can't believe an Earthman!" Bedzyk shouted, stumbling forward to wrest the rasp-pistol from Samswope's grip.

Samswope fired point-blank. First the rasp of the power spurting from the muzzle of the tiny pistol filled the drive room, then the smell of burning flesh, and Bedzyk's eyes opened wide in pain. He screamed thinly, and staggered back against Curran. Curran stepped aside, and Bedzyk mewed in agony, and crumpled onto the deck. A huge hole had been seared through his huge chest. Huge chest, huge death; and he lay there with his eyes open, barely forming the words "don't . . . you can't, can't t-trust an Earth-mmm . . ." with his bloody lips.

Curran's face had paled out till it was a blotch against the dark blue of his jumper. "Y-y-y . . ."

Samswope moved into the drive room and took Curran by the sleeve, almost where Bedzyk had held it. "You promise us we can land and be allowed to settle someplace on Earth?"

Curran nodded dumbly. Had they asked for Earth in its socket, he would have nodded agreement. Samswope still held the rasp.

"All right, then . . . get your med detachment up here, and get that blood. We want to go home, Mr. Curran, we want to go home more than anything!"

They led him to the lock. Behind him, Curran saw three mutants lifting the blasted body of Bedzyk, bearing it on their shoulder through the crowd. The body was borne out of sight down a cross-corridor, and Curran followed it out of sight with his eyes.

Beside him, Samswope said: "To the garbage lock. We go that way, Mr. Curran." His tones were hard and uncompromising. "We don't like going that way, Mr. Curran. We want to go home. You'll see to it, won't you, Mr. Curran?"

Curran again nodded dumbly, and entered the lock linking ships.

Ten hours later, the med detachment came up. The Discards were completely obedient and tremendously helpful.

It took nearly eleven months to inoculate the entire population of the Earth and

the rest of the System — strictly as preventative caution dictated — and during that time no more Discards took their lives. Why should they? They were going home. Soon the tugs would come, and help jockey the big Discard vessel into orbit for the run to Earth. They were going home. There was room for them now, even in their condition. Spirits ran high, and laughter tinkled oddly down the passageways in the 'evenings.' There was even a wedding between Arkay (who was blind and had a bushy tail) and a pretty young thing the others called Daanae, for she could not speak for herself. Without a mouth that was impossible. At the ceremony in the saloon, Samswope acted as minister, for the Discards had made him their leader in the same, silent way they had made Bedzyk the leader before him. Spirits ran high, and the constant knowledge that as soon as Earth had the Sickness under control they would be going home, kept them patient; eleven months.

Then one 'afternoon' the ship came.

Not the little tugs, as they had supposed, but a cargo ship nearly as big as their own home. Samswope rushed to synch in the locks, and when the red lights merged on the board, he locked the two together firmly, and scrambled back through the throng to be the first to greet the men who would deliver them.

When the lock sighed open, and they saw the first ten who had been thrust in, they knew the truth.

One had a head flat as a plate, with no eyes, and its mouth in its neck. Another had several hundred thousand slimy tentacles where arms should have been, and waddled on stumps that could never again be legs. Still another was brought in by a pair of huge empty-faced men, in a bowl. The bowl contained a yellow jelly, and swimming in the yellow jelly was the woman.

Then they knew: They were not going home. As lockful after lockful of more Discards came through, to swell their ranks even more, they knew these were the last of the tainted ones from Earth. The last ones who had been stricken by the Sickness — who had changed before the serum could save them. These were the last, and now the Earth was clean.

Samswope watched them trail in, some dragging themselves on appendageless torsos, others in baskets, still others with one arm growing from a chest, or hair that was blue and fungus growing out all over the body. He watched them and knew the man he had killed had been correct. For among the crowd he glimpsed a bare-chested Discard with huge sores on his body. Curran.

And as the cargo ship unlocked and swept back to Earth — with the silent warning: *Don't follow us, don't try to land, there's no room for you here* — Samswope could hear Bedzyk's hysterical tones in his head:

Don't trust them! There's no room for us anywhere! Don't trust them!

You can't trust an Earthman!

Samswope started walking slowly toward the galley, knowing he would need someone to seal the garbage lock after him. But it didn't matter who it was. There were more than enough Discards aboard now. ●

Harlan Ellison

If any writer can dissolve the line separating sf and mainstream literature, it ought to be this man. He is a super-celebrity among sf/fantasy readers, but this is not enough tribute to him for writing that transcends the genre and yet is not seen by countless other

eyes which should be aware of it. Ellison has important, frightening, controversial, outrageous and hilarious things to say — in books, teleplays, magazines, on the podium, in person, on the phone — wherever. A brain-purge to see or hear.

Like an instant est course, sandblasting the sacred cows of your psyche. Catch him wherever, whenever you can. And educate

a mainstream friend. His most recent books: All The Lies That Are My Life, Blood's A Rover and Shatterday. — Ed

Cards

The cards fall in their own design
For eyes like mine to read;
Lovers, Jester, Mooncard, Death —
Sweep those words away.

Regather all into your hand,
Mix them, back to face . . .

Lovers, Clown, full Moon and Death —
Again?
No, let them rest.

Light the candle
Stroke the cat
Begin your working day.

Love and Laughter.
Peace and Sleep.

The cards were kind
Today.

— Sharon Lee

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller (who have both had stories in *Amazing/Fantastic*) were recently married. They wrote these poems each without the other knowing — and then were surprised at the continuity of thought. — Ed



Choices

Tell no tarot for me,
nor I for you:
we have about us the revolutions —
the alterations;
the music of the spheres if quark-bred
and what the cards tell or don't
is no more mutable
than the decisions made or unmade, yesterday

are the choices mine to make?
are the choices yours to make?
are the choices the cards to make?

ah yes, the answer is clear.
All and none of the above,
frequently,
over and over: only
required events occur

it little matters
who cast them.

— Steve Miller



Out of 53 identical, red-haired
Foxworths . . . who killed Teddy?

Ron Goulart

the FOXWORTH LEGATEES

The shove from behind was forceful and highly successful. He went stumbling against the ornate neowood bannister, fell right over it and began a plummet down the deep stairwell toward the hardplaz floor way below. Harry Prince twisted his pudgy green body as he fell, first checking upward for a glimpse of who had attempted to do him in. The landing was empty.

"Concentrate on a safe arrival," he advised himself and proceeded to scrunch into a position he'd learned from a Venusian freefall mudwrestler once while he was working on a case in an orbiting sportsdome in the faroff Earth System.

Harry hit the floor with a breathtaking thunk.

He remained huddled there for a moment. "Apparently I didn't quite assimilate all his teaching," he decided as various pains went sizzling through his plump body. "Still, I'm alive and unbroken."

"Goodness, sir, what a fearful fall," said the house. "Shall I summon. . ."

"I'm okay, Windways." He smiled, bleakly, at the nearest speaker grid, which was mounted in the woodlike flooring. "Happen to notice who launched me?"

The house made a throat clearing noise. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Prince. I don't have monitoring cameras up there, since the late Mr. Foxworth used that floor chiefly for. . ."

"Yeah, I know what he devoted himself to on that level of this orbiting. . ."

"You mustn't get the idea, sir, Mr. Foxworth was a libertine."

Smiling again, Harry made himself stand up. "Urg," he remarked when the new pains came shooting up through his legs.

"Are you quite certain, sir, you wouldn't like. . ."

"I happen to be fiercely independent, Windways. I'll simply stand here in quiet agony for a moment or two and then go hobbling on about my business."

"As you wish, sir."

Flexing his stubby green fingers, Harry shrugged out of his coat. Holding the backside of the gaudy plaid garment up in front of him, he pressed his nose into

the cloth. Lowering the coat, he narrowed one eye and gazed up at the spot from which he'd recently plunged.

"You'll excuse my asking, sir," said the house politely, "but could your unusual behavior of the moment be due perhaps to shock or, worse, a concussion?"

"Hush," advised Harry, giving the coat another sniff.

While he was getting back into it, his head rolled back and he sneezed. Then he sneezed twice more, large robust sneezes which echoed through the empty foyer.

"There's a good deal of Callisto Flu going around, Mr. Prince; perhaps you. . ."

"Merely an allergic reaction, Windways, my boy." Harry chuckled while he seamed up his red and blue coat.

"It still might be a good idea, if I might be so bold as to suggest it, to allow a medibot to exam. . ."

"Not now." Harry started moving again. "I was on my way to view the body."

HARRY AND his wives had arrived at the satellite arguing. That was yesterday morning, twenty three hours before Harry got pushed off the stairs and a shade more than thirteen hours before the murder.

The shuttle which had brought them up from the planet Barnum to the private Earth-style-Victorian residential satellite made a very wobbly docking.

"I told you you shouldn't have rendered the robot pilot all googly-eyed," Harry's lovely redhaired wife remarked to his lovely blonde wife.

"Oh, Nertz," said Quality Prince. "I only went and used my WT on him on account of the way he made Harry all sniffly when he came into the passengerpod to serve carobcocoa and soynuts with. . ."

"Honestly, Quality," said Marsha Prince, "why do you always use initials to refer to your wild talents? You make psionic abilities sound like something children do behind the agridome."

Quality grabbed her plaz overnight case off the rack. "Holy cow, it sure seems like I can never please you, Marsha. I mean, for wamsakes, I'm only trying to protect Harry from. . ."

"Kids," put in their husband, easing his plump green person up out of his shape-hug seat, "keep in mind that this is a business venture. They've hired the Interplanetary Detective Agency, Harry Prince, Proprietor, to. . ."

"Private dick, huh?" scowled the only other passenger in the just-docked shuttle.

"We haven't met," mentioned Harry, eyeing the lanky, freckled and redhaired young man.

"My name is. . ."

"No, I didn't mean I wanted to meet you," said Harry. "Only meant to point out I don't allow strangers to insult me."

"Since when is it an insult to call a cheap gumshoe a cheap gumshoe?" The redheaded youth shouldered into his spunglaz greatcoat, sneering.

"Harry, please," requested Quality, "let me telep him outside for a teenie bit. Soon as he turns just a little bitty blue I'll. . ."

"No free samples." Harry headed for the disembark door now that the allsafe bulb had commenced flashing.

"I'm Evans Foxworth," called the young man toward Harry's wide back.

Marsha murmured, "A synth I think."

"Tomorrow at this time I may well be a rich man," said Evans Foxworth.

"Look us up then," suggested Harry. Nudging the door open, he stepped across into the connect tunnel.

Quality took his left arm, whispering, "I stopped his implant watch anyway."

"Conserve your energy."

"We should have left her home," said Marsha, taking his other arm.

"No," said Harry, "the reason I enjoy my work so much is because I'm always able to bring my whole family along."

At the end of the ribbed plaz tunnel was a door of very believable fake oak. Its brass knob turned itself and the door swung inward with a faint quivering creak when Harry and his wives were still three steps from it.

"Allow me, if I may, to welcome you to the home of the late Amos Foxworth. The name of this handsome orbiting mansion is Old Windways. It was named after Mr. Foxworth's childhood home on the planet Esmeralda. This is Old Windways speaking."

"Hot darn," exclaimed Quality, letting go of her bright green husband and gazing around the spacious foyer. "This is so quaint it gives you the collywobbles."

"Too bad collywobbles aren't fatal." Marsha dropped her bags onto a servocart.

There was a thick rug on the floor, decorated with an intricate pattern of Earth system flowers and leaves. The paneling on the walls was designed to suggest stained mahogany, the windows were very good imitation stained glass. They pretended, and very well, that they gave views of green hills and not of the inner workings of the Foxworth private satellite.

"Let me see. Here we have Mr. and Mrs. Harry Prince, and Mr. Evans Foxworth," said the polite and cultured voice of the house's central control center. "Forgive me for mentioning that we seem to be one guest too many..."

"Two wives," said Harry, pointing at Marsha and Quality in turn. "#1 wife and #2 wife. Mrs. Marsha... oof!"

Marsha had kicked him hard in the ankle. "Damn it, Harry, I told you to quit that #1 and #2 business. It... it's demeaning."

"Not at all," he said, "I don't feel a bit demeaned by it."

"Me, not you."

"Marsha, you're so gollydarned uppity." Quality lowered her hands behind her buttocks and gazed around admiringly at the imitation grandeur of their surroundings. "A fella with all of Harry's talents doesn't have to be civil. I mean holy gosh, if he..."

"I am always civil," corrected Harry. "I treat all and sundry with such extreme deference I'm often accused of fawning."

"Hey, what about my room?" asked the redhaired young man.

"Forgive me, sir," said Old Windways out of a speaker grid in the nearest wall. "At the risk of inspiring another squabble, might I ask if you are Evans Foxworth #26?"

"No, you dimwit," said the freckled youth. "I'm Evans Foxworth #27. Can't you keep the heirs straight?"

"My sorrow over the passing of your late father has..."

"Save the sob stuff. Where's my room?"

"If you'll be so good as to place your baggage on servocart #3, it will..."

"You mean #4, buster," said the cart.

"Ah," sighed the voice of Old Windways, "a death in the family certainly plays havoc with... #4, will you kindly escort Mr. Foxworth up to his room in the South Wing."

Dumping his checkered plaz carpetbag on the indicated cart, the young man asked, "That where you're putting the rest of them?"

"The rest of whom?"

"The rest of the idiot Evans Foxworths."

"I believe so, sir. Yes. At least Evans Foxworth 1 through 30."

"There's thirty seven of us. How come you . . ." His cart was already scooting up the wide staircase, its tractorlike treads clunking over the padded steps. Evans Foxworth #27 went scurrying off after it.

Close to one of Harry's green ears Marsha said, "A synth for sure. Notice the little pucker mark on the back of his neck."

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "Besides which there are only sixteen known clones. Anyone calling himself #27 has to be a synthetic."

"JEEZUS," REMARKED Teddy Foxworth, shambling across the bookless library to a floating glazchair and slumping down into it. "I hate this frapping place. Every time I'm up here I get as woozy as a . . ."

"Forgive us, sir, we try our best to travel a smooth and gentle orbit through the reaches of . . ."

"Oh, stuff it up your gear box," Teddy told the voice of Old Windways. He was a large heavyset man of forty one, redhaired and freckled. "Listen, Skudd, can't you give me even a hint as to what I inherit? After all, I am the only real Foxworth in the whole pack. That ought to . . ."

"Don't be foolish, dear boy," said Broomer Skudd. "The vows of an attorney, especially one with Intergalactic Accreditation, are as sacred as those of a . . . what do you call it . . . priest." He rubbed his scaly brown hands together, producing a cheese-grating sound. "Perhaps we ought not to be bickering in front of our detective."

Harry, sunk deep in a very believable morris chair, said nothing.

"Jeezus, Skudd, I'm not bickering," Teddy told the thickset lizard man and glanced over at Harry. "You ought to see me down at a board meeting of Vast, Ltd if you want to find out what real bick . . ."

"Aarghh," said the attorney.

Teddy jumped up from his seat. "What's wrong? Are you suffering some kind of attack?"

"Dear boy, don't be so skittish. I was merely clearing my throat prior to beginning our discussion with Mr. Prince." He rocked once in his bentwood chair.

Teddy slumped, uneasy, back into his anachronistic floating chair. "I really get nervy when I'm up in this thing." He wiped perspiration from his freckled forehead. "I'd like to junk it and sell the scrap for . . ."

"Sir, we'd hate to think . . ."

"Can't we turn this nurfing thing off?"

The lizard man shook his head, making a dry leaves skittering across parquet sound. "Not without a good deal of difficulty, Theodore," he said. "Besides which, we quite possibly lack the authority to take . . ."

"I know my place," said Old Windways out of the speaker which dangled from the high beamed ceiling. "I shall, henceforth, remain discreetly in the background, awaiting a summons."

"How the blinking bejeezus the old boy could live up here in this pansy of a house is beyond me," commented Teddy.

"Uh hum," said the house.

"Now what?"

"The references to possible sexual deviations," said Old Windways, "while not offensive to me, might well unsettle Mr. Skudd, since he's a notorious . . ."

"Dear boy," said the attorney, with a scowl up at the speaker, "how many times must I remind you that in my part of the galaxy and among my breed of

lizardman it is perfectly legal for two consenting males to . . . what do you call it . . . any time they wish."

"Begging your pardon, I'm sure, sir."

Teddy drew out a plyochief to rub at his cheeks. "Speaking of sexual preferences," he said to Harry, "I hear you have two wives."

"Thus far," replied Harry.

"Been thinking about that since the Barnum System revised the marriage laws last . . . how does it work out?"

Harry said, "How it works for me and how it works for you are two different things."

"What I'm getting at," persisted Teddy, "is do you all three . . . when you're in bed, you know . . . do you all three . . . you know?"

"Skudd," said Harry at the lizard man, "I better remind you I get paid by the hour. The fee is 8000 trudollars per, plus expenses. If you want to use up the time talking about my colorful adventures in the sack, okay. Except it's a bit off target."

"You don't have to get salty," said Teddy. "I'm your boss after all. If I want . . ."

"Skudd, Ditmer & Arends is paying our fee," corrected Harry. "Plus which, paying me money doesn't make anybody my boss."

"I'd like to have you working at Vast, Ltd for a few days," said Teddy, hands fistng.

"It's not vast enough for both of us."

"Jeezus, Skudd, why did you go hire a wiseass operative to help us out in such a serious . . ."

"Suppose," cut in Harry, "we get to the situation you hired me to handle, Skudd."

"Aargghhh," said the attorney, clearing his throat. "A good suggestion, dear boy." Resting his brown hands on his knees, he continued. "As you no doubt know, Mr. Prince, the late Amos Foxworth was rather a . . . what do you call it . . ."

"Egomaniacal bastard," replied his only true son.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," agreed the lizard lawyer. "Especially in his declining years, when he settled up here in this fine old mansion high above the . . ."

"Thank you for the kind words, sir."

"Oh, shut the blinking bejeezus up!"

"My late client," Skudd went on, "was long fascinated with . . . how might one say it . . . with perpetuating himself. Impatient, and relatively unsuccessful, with the more traditional methods of replication, he resorted to various alternate processes."

"He was as goofy as a milchbug," said Teddy.

"A what?" Skudd blinked.

"Jeezus, 17% of Vast Ltd's intergalactic business comes from teleporting milch. A milchbug is what contaminates the darn stuff, and it's noted for being goofy. Much like my late pop."

"Amos Foxworth was a trifle eccentric," admitted Skudd. "Being one of the richest men in our Barnum System of planets, he was able to devote considerable funds to his . . . what do you call it . . . hobby."

"It was being up here in this blinking house," said Teddy to the green detective. "Getting whirled around like this would make even the sanest man nuts after a spell."

"My late client," said the attorney, "utilized several means of reproduction."

Harry said, "Which resulted in twenty seven synthetic humanoid simulacras of

himself, sixteen clones, nine sons resulting from seminal implantation of surrogate mothers and one, not quite successful, android duplication."

"That's Cousin Archie," said Teddy, scowling. "The black sheep of the family."

"Aaarggh," said Skudd. "Under the current liberalized inheritance laws of our system, gentlemen, synthetics, clones and other types of artificially produced offspring are all considered legitimate heirs. My client took this into account when drafting his last will and testament, wishing to avoid any lengthy litigation after his demise."

"Which is why I'm not only stuck up here in this dizzying dump for the reading of the flapping will," complained Teddy, "but I have to rub shoulders with fifty-three replicas of my dad."

"Fifty-two," corrected Skudd. "Poor Archie is laid up in a repair shop on Barafunda. Seems his last oil change was rejected by his body and . . ."

"Fifty-two flapping simulacras is plenty," said Teddy. "All of 'em looking just like my dad did in his twenties. He started doing this, you know, when I was still a kid. The ones with substitute mothers take a long time to grow. A synth, though, you can whip up in a matter of months. They show it, too."

Harry crossed one green ankle over the other. "You anticipate things going wrong?" he asked them.

"The reading of a will traditionally brings out the worst in people," said the lizard, "even synthetic people. I deemed it advisable to have a competent private detective on hand to cope with any emergency."

"What exactly are you expecting?"

"Trouble."

"Anything more specific you can tell me?"

"There may be nothing," said Skudd, shaking his scaly head. "Or there . . ."

"Speaking of trouble," interrupted the house, "might I call your attention to the monitor screens?"

The richly paneled far wall slid aside to reveal a bank of six large vidscreens. The pictures on five were dim and shadowy. On the sixth screen, bright and clear, showed a group of redhaired and freckled young men trading punches and insults.

"Damn synthie!"

"Test tube baby!"

"Your mama was a surrogate!"

"Your papa's a test tube!"

Bop!

Whap!

Spop!

Harry rose. "Where's that happening?"

"The conservatory, sir," replied Old Windways.

"I'll stop it."

He headed for the oaklike door, which the house politely opened for him.

Out in the richly carpeted hallway the sounds of the family brawl were loud. As Harry strode along he took in the goldframed oil paintings which pictured past representatives of the Foxworth clan. "Lots of redheads," said Harry.

A grand piano came rolling at him as he crossed the threshold of the domed music room.

He avoided it by stepping behind a potted palm. The heavy instrument went rumbling on out into the corridor.

"... seven . . . eight . . . nine . . ." he counted, tallying up the combatants. He walked over to where the piano had been, cupped his hands to his green lips.

"Fellas, let's quit."

"Go nurf yourself, greenie!"

One Foxworth jerked an identical one up by the armpits, sent him bicycling back at Harry.

Dodging and shaking his head, Harry stepped over to the tosser. Smiling, he kneed him in the groin.

"Foul," exclaimed the synthetic.

"Agreed." Using this Foxworth as a battering ram, Harry knocked aside three more of the fighting heirs.

When a total of six were on the rug, sprawled in assorted attitudes of defeat, Harry again suggested, "What say we quit?"

A clone threw a punch at him. "They said dirty things about the lab where I was born. I don't take that from . . . oof!"

Harry had punched him below the belt. He tossed the redhaired man into one of the two still standing Foxworth legatees, bowling that one over.

The last one upright observed, "You hardly fight fair."

"Right," agreed Harry. "Keep that in mind the next time I ask you to cease."

DINNER THAT evening was not a complete success.

The meal in the immense panelled dining hall was served by humanoid robots. Half way through his nori salad Harry began to sneeze. This made Quality, sitting on his left, angry and she used one of her wild talents to freeze two of the robots in their tracks.

There was a slight spillover effect out in the kitchen and the android chef went slightly blooey, began to babble the names of his favorite spices.

"... basil . . . marjoram . . . sage . . . coriander . . . cumin . . . fenugreek . . . cassia . . . chervil . . ."

Directly across the long, whitecovered table from Harry and his wives one of the surrogate mothers, a possible legatee, started to light up and flash yellow, crimson and sea blue.

"She's Zoo Mulligan," Marsha, one of whose specialties was backgrounding people, explained in a whisper to Harry. "Used to be an electrified stripper in her heyday, has neon tubing implanted in her skin at various strategic spots. Once you do that, it's virtually impossible to remove."

"Quality, my pet," suggested Harry, "stop all this, huh?"

"Well, gollyzam, I don't like it when you're uncomfortable, Harry honey."

Zoo Mulligan's left breast was flashing gold through the nyloprene of her singlet. "Lawdie, reminds me of my bygone days of glory. Whatever can be happening? I've half a mind to hop on the table and . . ."

"Mother, please!" said three of the identical redhaired young men seated at various spots around the table.

"Nertz," said Quality resignedly.

The former dancer stopped flashing, the two servos resumed their duties, the chief cried out a final, "Oregano!" and was silent.

"I am fascinated by your work," remarked an albino dwarf down the table from Harry. "We haven't met, Mr. Prince, but I am FullProf Emerson of the Barnum Tampering With Nature Institute." Spreading his little white hands wide, he nodded to his left, to his right and then across the table. "These handsome replicas of our late host are all my own work."

"Synth lover!" muttered one of the redhaired clones.

"You're quite a craftsman, professor," Harry told him, grinning.

"And you, sir, are quite a detective," returned the little professor. "Well do I

recall your brilliant work in solving such cases as that of the Mystery Of The Teleported Bride. I believe you had only one wife at that time."

"I started small, yes."

Marsha kicked him in the ankle.

At the head of the table Teddy Foxworth arose with a wobble, announcing, "I think I'm going to be . . . if you'll excuse me . . . no matter how many times I come up to this rotten place I . . . I have a bad case of the woozies . . ." Tottering, he made his way out of the dining room.

"Fleshie!" catcalled one of the synthetic Foxworths.

"I don't blame the poor man for having the heebie jeebies," said Quality. "This setup would give anybody the willies. I mean, dozens and dozens of identical redhaired fellas. It's like looking into mirrors and experiencing that infinite regression effect."

"Beanbrain," remarked Marsha, returning to her salad.

"Teamwork, teamwork," reminded Harry, sneezing once more.

THE HOUSE coughed politely. Harry sat up wide awake, his green right hand diving to the stungun holstered in his armpit.

"Mr. Prince, are you there, sir?" inquired Old Windways. "As you know, I'm not allowed to monitor your wing of myself visually or otherwise. But I have an urgent message for you."

Harry, who slept in bottoms only, swung his pudgy body out of the floating bedpad and dropped to the richly carpeted floor of the bedchamber.

In the fourposter against the far wall Marsha was awake and watching him.

Quality slept peacefully in the other fourposter bed.

Harry trotted to the speaker mounted in the paneled wall, leaned his pajamaed backside against a clawfoot table and flicked the respond-switch on. "This is Harry Prince," he told the house.

"Thank goodness, sir," said Old Windways. "you'd best come to the library at once."

"Why?"

"It's Mr. Foxworth, sir. I fear he's dead."

"Which Mr. Foxworth?"

"Master Teddy, sir. Hurry, do."

"But he . . . Yeah, be right there." Harry turned off the respond-switch and then poked a green finger into his left ear. He squinted at the tiny device he extracted. "Still working."

Marsha, already dressed in slax and tunic, moved to his side. "That's a doorguard, supposed to warn you if Teddy left his bedroom."

"Thought I had him safely tucked in for the night," said Harry. "Since he was one of the most likely targets for violence, I thought I'd know if he went out or anyone went in. A substantial frumus was supposed to commence in my ear."

"Nothing, though?"

"Nary a beep." He set the tiny button on the table. "I'll dress, then we'll go look at what's left of Teddy Foxworth."

"Anything . . . ?" murmured Quality, still hunkered under her quilts.

"Don't need you yet." Harry dropped his pajama pants.

"Or ever," added Marsha, handing him his striped 1-piece cazsuit.

"Tsk," said Harry.

CLAD IN SPINDEX anklelength niteshirt and neowool robe, Teddy Foxworth lay dead in the center of the bookless library. There was a small hole burned

through his robe, nightshirt and chest.

"Lazgun," noted Harry, looking down at the corpse. "Lowest setting."

"Close range," said Marsha, who was kneeling beside the dead legatee. "You're right about the lowest level setting, Harry, the blast didn't even go clean through him."

"Spare me the dreadful details," said Skudd the lawyer.

Harry made a slow circuit of the dead man. "I wonder . . ." He halted, rubbed a green knuckle under his nose. "Felt a sneeze, but it must've gotten sidetracked." He continued his stroll around the body. "String."

Marsha nodded. "Unraveling from the hem of his robe." The pretty brunette leaned further, studying the wound.

"Such a profession you people have," observed the lizard lawyer, hugging himself and backing until he was in an armchair. "Dealing with crimes and . . . what do you call it . . . death. Terrible."

"Why was Teddy down here?" asked Harry.

"No notion, dear boy. I assumed he, poor fellow, was in his room in the north wing."

"So did I."

"Aarrgghhh," coughed Skudd. "Don't get the idea I'm being hypercritical, Prince, yet it was to prevent just such a dreadful turn of events that you were hired in the first place."

"Best thing I can do now," said Harry, "is catch the killer."

"I'd appreciate that," said the attorney, letting his scaly brown hands dangle forlornly.

"Perhaps," suggested the house, "I can be of some help in that area."

Harry asked, "How?"

"Well, sir, I happen to have taken video pictures of the murder as it occurred."

INSPECTOR FREE of the Galactic Homicide Squad said, "Let's clear the air right off. I'm a gorilla."

He was. A huge, hairy barrelchested gorilla, wearing a tinted plaz derby and a lycra greatcoat.

Harry crossed the library to shake his paw. "No need to . . ."

"You know my story, Harry," the GHB Inspector said. "Others, however, might wonder how a gorilla came to . . ."

"If it's going to be grim and gruesome, I'd just as soon pass the explanation by," said the lizard solicitor. "Corpses and murder and . . . what do you call it . . . violence all upset me."

"It began on faroff Tarragon when I was coshed —"

"What say we look at the dead man?" suggested Harry.

Free lumbered over to stare down at the dead heir. "Seems to me I've seen this guy before, Harry."

"In the hall when you arrived via shuttle."

"Yeah, there was a guy standing there with redhair and freckles. Relative?"

"One of many."

Inspector Free squated, touched at the chest of the corpse with his left paw. "Lazgun up close. Anybody see it?"

"I did, sir."

"Huh?" The gorilla stood, cocking his shaggy head in the direction of the dangling speaker.

"It's the house," said Harry. "He got pictures with the monitoring camera that watches this room."

The inspector asked, "If you could shoot vidtape, how come you couldn't stop the killing?"

"It was most regrettable, sir. Before I could even dispatch a robot to the library here, the deed was done and the killer gone," Old Windways explained. "I, to be sure, pleaded with the killer when I saw him raise his weapon. To no avail. The only thing left to do was capture the evil deed on tape."

Scratching at his broad chest, Inspector Free nodded at Harry. "You've seen these pictures already?"

Harry said, "Yep."

"Well, who the hell knocked this poor guy off?"

"It was a redhaired man," answered Harry, "with freckles."

QUALITY WAS singing in the shower. "Lad de doody do lah de doody do," came her melodious voice through the partially open imitation oak door.

Hands behind his head, Harry was stretched out on one of the fourposter beds. "Inspector Free found the weapon," he said to Marsha. "Or rather Old W did."

"Where?" Marsha was crosslegged on the rug.

"It was apparently dropped on a floor dispozehole in the hall outside the library," he replied. "Our helpful house spotted it while it was on its way to the central garbage processor."

"... oh la de daddy dee doody dee dum diddy dee..."

Wrinkling her pretty nose, Marsha asked, "Prints?"

"Sure."

"Whose?"

"Amos Foxworth's."

"The late Amos?"

"All the clones and all the synths have the same fingerprints as their sire," said Harry. "Same retinal patterns and saliva composition, too."

"At least that eliminates the surrogate branch of the family," said the darkhaired girl. "What about the gun itself?"

"A Westlake & Garfield selfcharge lazgun." Harry let his green eyelids nearly shut. "One of a dozen purchased from the Mom & Pop Gun Emporium on Tarragon by FullProf Emerzon. He gave them as presents to his twelve favorite Foxworth synths on their mutual birthday."

"How many brought their guns along?"

"Only five admit it. Old Windways has since found three more W&Gs enroute to eternity via various dispozeholes. Going to be tough to tie this particular murder weapon to an owner."

She rose, perched on the edge of the bed. "You seem calm."

"... lah de dah doody doddy doo..."

Marsha said, "When you're this placid, it usually means you're nearing a solution."

"It usually does, yep. What'd you think of that helpful tape of the murder that we saw?"

"Bathrobe," Marsha said.

"Yeah, there was no unraveled string showing in the pictures."

"He's shot by that redhaired fellow, falls to the library floor dead. So how did the robe get torn?"

"Apt query, m'love." He sat up. "And there's something else interesting. The wound."

She nodded, saying, "I'd like to take another look, but I think I know what you mean."

"Any ideas as to motive?"

"Everybody, all fifty-three of the redhaired men, has a motive. With Teddy Foxworth dead, it stands to reason the estate will be split differently. Everybody may possibly get more dough and worldly goods."

"Um," was all Harry would respond to that.

"Well, it must have something to do with the fact the will is supposed to be read shortly, doesn't it?"

"It does, yes." He leaned, kissed her fondly on the cheek. "Go down and take another look at the body, it's still in the library. I'll be along shortly."

"... la didy didy diddle dee dee ..."

Marsha stood free of the bed, one eyebrow rising. "Planning to dally with the beanbrain before —"

"I never dally while working on a case. Which you, as my #1 wife, ought to know."

"All too well," she said, leaving him.

IT WAS WHILE enroute down to the library a few moments later that Harry took his nonaccidental fall.

When he finally came strolling into the library he was whistling, green lips slightly puckered. "How are you, light of my life?"

Marsha was in an armchair. "We've been talking about the wound."

Inspector Free was leaning with an elbow on the pseudomarb mantle, peeling a banana. "Bananas and bamboo shoots... bamboo shoots and bananas... I agree with what is apparently your notion about the wound, Harry. But where does that take us?"

"Could we," requested Harry, grinning, "have all the guests gather in the ballroom?"

"What the hell for?"

"For one thing it amuses me to gaze on multitudes of redheads."

Marsha advised, "Do it, Inspector."

Harry told her, "Go fetch Quality."

"Why do we need that beanbrain at —"

"I'll explain shortly. Inspector?"

"I've been questioning them one by one and getting nowhere. Every damn one of them looks exactly like the killer on the tape." He swallowed the last bite of the banana. "Okay, Harry, I'll gather everybody. I have a feeling you're on the verge of staging a —"

"A little entertainment," said Harry.

"AARRGGH," SAID Lawyer Skudd, who was huddled on one of the multitude of folding chairs which had been set up in the immense whitewalled ballroom.

Harry, with a wife on each arm, came striding down the aisle between rows of dozens of identical redhaired and freckle-faced young men.

Zoo Mulligan's bosom flickered once and she clutched it. "I'm so nervous."

Reaching the front of the room, Harry boosted himself up on to the empty bandstand. Leaning at its edge he asked Quality quietly, "Sure you can do it, love?"

"Golly wow, it won't be no trouble at all, Harry honey."

"Beanbrain," said Marsha.

Harry straightened up, winked at Inspector Free, who was sitting in the last row and gnawing on bamboo shoots he absently drew out of a plazpouch. "Folks, we

have a very interesting problem facing us here," Harry began. "A murder with more than enough evidence. We have a replayable eyewitness account of the actual crime being committed, we have the weapon used and, as an extra bonus, some splendidly clear fingerprints." He smiled out at the assorted Foxworths and friends. "The trouble is, as Inspector Free and his crew have come to realize, we have an unusual setup aboard Old Windways. There are a couple score of you fellas who fit the description perfectly, right down to your fingertips." He lowered himself until he was sitting on the bandstand edge. "Short of a full confession or an arbitrary drawing of lots, it would seem near impossible to pin the crime on the actual killer ever."

"Let's read the will then and go home," suggested a redheaded and freckled young man in the second row.

"Almost impossible," Marsha told him.

"On the way downstairs awhile ago," Harry went on, "someone tried to kill me."

There was a spattering of applause from some of the redheaded young men.

"That gave me one more clue as to the identity of the killer." From a slashpocket in his cazsuit Harry removed a plyolope. "This thread is from the bathrobe Teddy Foxworth was wearing when he was murdered. I found it not on his robe, but caught on the rim of the large dispozehole in his bathroom."

Inspector Free ceased munching on his bamboo shoots.

Harry said, "When we made a careful study of the angle of the wound, something I'm sure Inspector Free was planning to do as soon as his Forensic Team arrived here at Old Windways, we discovered that Teddy Foxworth was shot by someone standing above him while he was in a reclining position."

"But in the vidtape," protested Skudd, "one can clearly see one of these redheaded Foxworths shooting him square in the chest while they stand facing each other."

"Exactly." Harry grinned more broadly. "Let us move on to the motive. Teddy Foxworth was murdered, as many of you have probably guessed, because of his father's will. Amos Foxworth felt, since Teddy was his only natural son, he deserved the major portion of the inheritance."

Little FullProf Emerson said, "My synthetics are as natural as —"

"Getting rid of Teddy would benefit all of you," Harry continued. "Stands to reason that with him out of the way, there'd be more for each of you to share. However, Teddy was not murdered because of the money he stood to inherit, nor because he'd gain control of Vast Ltd. Nope, he was killed because he also was to inherit this orbiting house." Leaning, he tapped Quality on the shoulder.

"I'm all set," she said, smiling. "Gollywhiz, Harry honey, don't fret."

"The house?" said Inspector Free, half rising. "You mean somebody else wanted this flying eyesore?"

"Let's say rather somebody didn't want Teddy to own it," replied Harry. "He had made it abundantly clear he hated Old Windways, intended to junk it if he inherited it. To prevent that our killer sent one of his minions up to Teddy's room late last night and had him shot with a pilfered lazgun as he sat on his bed preparing to turn in. His room, keep in mind, was in a monitored sector of the satellite."

Skudd asked, "Then why didn't —"

"Patience," advised Harry. "We're almost at the solution."

Completely upright, the gorilla inspector pointed a paw at Harry. "I saw that damn tape, Harry. Witnessed the whole damn murder."

Harry reason one foot slowly back and forth. "The tape is a fake, a very expert fake," he said. "Made by a smart computer with a lot of footage of freckled,

redheaded chaps and also some footage of Teddy Foxworth falling down. There's a fully-equipped tape editing lab in the bowels of Old Windways, I learned that from looking at Skudd's copy of the original floorplans. When your lab boys put that vidtape through any kind of sophisticated testing, Inspector Free, they'll be bound to note it's nothing but a composite."

"Yeah, but —"

"There's only one thing I'm allergic to," he said, leg still swinging with the regularity of a pendulum. "That's a robot. My nose, by sneezing, told me it was a robot who tried to do me in earlier. Just as it was a robot who did the actual shooting of Teddy Foxworth. The robots, the picture taking devices, all the rest of what was needed . . . are all controlled by Old Windways."

"Very smart of you, sir," said the house from a speaker directly behind Harry's back. "I fear I underestimated you, I didn't think you'd tumble at all."

"Underestimating me's a common mistake," Harry said, not bothering to turn around to look at the speaker.

"Master Teddy hated me, do you see? I'd listened in while my poor departed master drew up his will with the help of Lawyer Skudd," said Old Windways. "I was aware I would become the property of Teddy Foxworth upon the death of Amos Foxworth. It wasn't my place to argue with old Amos, though I did try to hint in subtle ways he was making a mistake leaving me to someone who loathed me. It did no good and when he passed away, I knew I had to do something to insure my survival. The will to live is something built into me, sir, so I can honestly say I acted with a clear conscience in all I did."

"I'll have to arrest you," said the Inspector. "Or whatever it is one does with a criminal house."

"No, sir, I fear not," said the voice of the house. "You'll never take me alive. I intend to use my auxrockets to take us out of orbit and then I'll crash us into the . . . awk! ark! I . . ."

Quality laughed, crossed her arms under her breasts. "A cinch, Harry honey," she announced. "I got him completely under my control, just like I promised."

Skudd said, "You mean to say that this attractive young lady has somehow gained control of this evil house?"

"Quality has a knack for taking over and incapacitating almost any kind of mechanism, large or small," explained Marsha. "It's just about her only asset."

"That's what I get for saving everybody from a fatal nosedive into oblivion."

The gorilla had pushed up to the bandstand. "I'm still not quite clear about that piece of thread, Harry."

"Old Windways had his robot kill Teddy in his room, then drop him down the dispozehole chute. The computer conveyed him to the library and up through another chute," said Harry. "When the body was being stuffed down the hole in Teddy's room, a thread caught and unraveled."

"Since there was no unraveled thread showing on the vidtape," picked up Marsha, "we knew something had to be wrong with the pictures. When Harry found that telltale thread, he knew Teddy Foxworth hadn't been killed in the library."

Inspector Free thought for a few seconds. "Okay, I get it."

Dropping to the floor from the stage, Harry said, "I suggest you read the will, Skudd, and then get all this herd of Foxworths off the satellite. It's a strain for my #2 wife to keep controlling the place." He took two steps, then halted. "Oh, and I think we ought to get a bonus for clearing this up so swiftly."

"Of course, of course," agreed the lizard lawyer. "Shall we say 50,000 trudollars extra?"

Harry stroked his plump green chin. "No, let's say 100,000." ●

Ron Goulart

Ron Goulart says: I didn't have very many literary relatives, but an uncle of mine read enormous quantities of pulp magazines and then stored them in a shadowy closet. To keep me quiet during childhood visits, they let me rummage through the collection and take home what I wanted. Thus just about my only positive memory of that particular long-gone uncle has to do with his introducing me to science fiction magazines. Among the pulpwood treasures I hauled away were many issues of the old, fat *Amazing* (edited by Ray Palmer) and in its

rough-edged pages I encountered the Whispering Gorilla, John Carter, displaced Lemurians and sundry other giants of imaginative literature. I fear I never quite recovered from that early contagion, which is why you'll still find me in the pages of *Amazing* now and then. Among my recent sf novels are *Hail, Hibbler* and *Skyrocket Steele*.

THE GREAT-PEOPLE, PERSONAL, ALL-FOR-MYSELF DREAM (Sure, I write Science Fiction – WHY?)

I have a dream of BIG people in this world,
People who when I smack them will not bristle up to slam back;
I have this vision of true GIANTS strolling our land,
Beings who when I'm wrong and act like a dolt day and night
Will come right behind being kind, may even KNOW that I'm nice;
I have great hopes for whole Other Worlds seeing it ALL my way,
Reasonable Life all, all the time, nodding its heads at my Light
And saying, "Yes, YES! of course, and really, Earth Friend,
you're OH, SO right."

See! I know how to live! and I know what I want and I know
How others ALL should be all the time, each and every single day
of the year.

Just to get them to be it, then be there as they are it —
That's my dream! that's My Dream!! that's MY DREAM!!! — damned
average, usual, garden-variety, continually-human
Human Being — YES?

— David R. Bunch

**GENE
KILCZER**



**The
Sea
Above**

WAS LATE AGAIN, dammit! The water was darkening and predators would be stirring in the depths. Ahead, the undersea Nautilian village of Val Tira glowed phosphorescent green through a grid of bone-woven fence. I felt the sample sack at my utility belt. It contained six beryl crystals I'd just dug out of the rich pegmatite deposit at the bottom of Blue Grotto. This should make the Quazar brains back at United Trade Worlds jump for greed, beryl being the stuff from which beryllium is made, and that being an ingredient of the stuff from which wars are made.

I gill-reined the Sea Tyger I rode through twisting coral canyons and up cliff walls that were deepening to indigo in the failing light. The Tyger was a good mount, a twelve-foot racer bred by the Nautilians for endurance and the homing instinct. But I'd have to hide the crystals before entering the village. As far as the Nautilians knew, I was there representing *Planets for Peace*, a branch of the UTW Government, to help ease them into the economic fold and teach them the ways of the worlds; the ultimate goal being that they, too, could benefit from the trading worlds' exchange of products.

It was one of those half-truths UTW is so fond of, the other half being a coded message I'd received from Central that read, N.D. NAUTILUS — CHECK OUT MINING PROSPECTS.

So I'd spent the last three N. weeks working both sides of the truth. But every time I tried to explain the workings of *Planets for Peace* to the Val Tirians, it ended with those good aliens explaining to me that I was really their Messenger from God. And it is not an easy thing to play Second in Command to all Creation, especially when one knows that one's goals are not all that pure. Like for instance reporting this find to UTW, who would then proceed to use Nautilus' deposits of beryl in the war against the Alterians, those audacious alien folk who dared covet the same prime planets as UTW.

The village was a brightening glow in the blue distance when I felt a slow itch begin along my left thigh and creep up my hip. I mumbled a few choice words into the darkening water as the tingling climbed and did a soft-shoe around my ear. So my Terran cortex still refused to interpret water vibrations from the grafted lateral lines as anything but itches! But up in the frontals I knew better. A night hunter of substantial proportions was moving this way.

I'd told those Nova IQs back at labquarters it wasn't going to work! Sure, they could equip a field operative with gills, sealed air-filled translungs, grafted footfins and handwebs, skintights to keep him cozy and well-oiled, neutral buoyancy and all; they could tack on memory cells containing the local language and send him down to the cold gray seas of the ocean planet Nautilus, but they couldn't convince the Terran gray matter that it was really a fish brain!

Which left me three-hundred feet down, with danger at eight o'clock or thereabouts, and an insulted somesthetic cortex that read it all as a rash!

I didn't need to urge the Tyger into a faster pace. I flattened over his back as a wind of water streamed my hair across my eyes. His brain knew how to interpret lateral signals and his instincts told him to find a likely spot and burrow into the sand. That was OK for Sea Tygers, but I had no periscopic breathing tubes.

So when he found his chosen patch and began to settle, I took my feet out of the tail stirrups and kicked him hard. He jerked to the left, hit a coral branch and I slid halfway down his sandpaper back. I could say I had a Tyger by the tail, but why dredge up ancient clichés? I held onto the reins and he wasn't too happy about those bits tugging at his gills. He reminded me of a horse I once rode, a Roman-nosed bay who would purposely swerve under low-hanging branches

and drop his head as we galloped by.

"You get no concentrated plankton tonight, fish," I told him as I regained the saddle and drove him toward the green glow.

We crossed the stray eddy of a deep ocean river that sent cold bottom water washing over us and brought with it the bitter taste of silt and grimy sand. I could feel it crunch between my teeth. The Tyger's sides contracted as he plowed against the current's siren drag. I clamped my legs around him. The disturbed water turned to brown soup and seaweed waved like wind-driven flags on the coral walls.

The transmitter on my belt began to pulse. Some time for a call from Fondsworth! I flipped it on, fitted the earphone and throat mike, and Fondsworth's butter-tones invaded my head.

"Michael, are you there?"

Night was spreading its blind wings and the itch was now a rash.

"Depends on where you mean by *there*, Fondsworth."

"Well, somewhere in the vicinity of Val Tira would suffice."

"You got it."

I pictured him sitting before the console of the orbiting ship, more cold-blooded than any fish in these gray seas. He was a sponge, was Fondsworth, absorbing the pleasures of the senses and countering his overindulgences with sudden fasts and moody retreats from all things enticing. He was half Stoic, half Epicurean, and he didn't know whether to prefer mind or body, though the weak flesh mostly won out.

And so, spongelike, he only gave when he was squeezed.

Except when he was bunked with his Annedroid, which was just as often as he could get away from such mundane chores as seeing to the ships' infrequent needs, and my rather frequent ones. He'd burn out the torso batteries on that machine yet. Or his own.

But every agent in the field had an orbiting "Angel." That was law. Mine just had wine-stained robes, that's all.

"Returning from a field trip, are you?" he inquired. "Rather late in the day."

"Or early in the night." I patted the sack. "Got us some beryl crystals, though."

"Ah! Well done, Michael, well done! Does the deposit appear to be a commercial concentration?"

"Rich as your Annedroid's bag of tricks!"

"Michael, must you constantly make snide remarks concerning..."

"And as pure, Fondsworth, just as pure. It's a pegmatite deposit with a large fracture zone of massive beryl. The crystals are so pure I can hardly see them in the water. The deposit trends southeasterly, about a kilometer away from Val Tira and a hundred feet deeper."

"Splendid! This opens the planet like a ripe fruit. And we shall be among the earliest harvesters!"

The Tyger was becoming impossible to handle. He didn't see the village as sanctuary, but followed his burrowing compulsion to a silty stretch he'd found. I leaned back, forcing down his tail, drew up his head with the reins and pointed him toward the village. My laterals were having an allergic reaction to whatever was approaching.

"Listen, Fondsworth, why not send down the taxi and pick me up now? We can both sleep dry tonight on our way back to Central."

I could almost hear the juices seething up the sides of that caldron atop his spine as he wrestled with a way to keep the mission alive. The longer he orbited

Nautilus, the firmer his own legal claim on whatever was claimable.

"Fondsworth, in just a little bit I'm going to have a very large dinner guest on my hands. He's about crawling up my ass now. So drop that damn planet-hopper!"

"I'm afraid I cannot do that. No . . . not just yet. You see, you've still to convince the Nautilians that UTW mining would be to their benefit. They trust you, Michael, and as you must already know, Interstel code states that a mining license cannot be issued until all intelligent and/or social inhab . . ."

"Fuck Interstel law, you Annedroid freak! I'm about to be eaten alive and you quote me statutes?"

"Then I suggest," his butter-tones had curdled, "that you'd best not expend your energy on vulgarities that could lead to a libel suit, and concentrate on attaining the village gate. A professional does not plead to abort a mission unless there are extenuating circumstances!"

There was a click, then silence, which I broke with a few more Fondsworthian descriptions. He was one of nature's passive predators, I decided. A Bushlurker, who waits till the kill's been made, then approaches the feast flanked by lawyers who give good and valid reasons why their client should claim a haunch or two.

The glow ahead was resolving itself into separate lights; *lanterns* consisting of phosphorescent jellyfish stuffed into air bladders. Above these, the thick greenish forms of the Nautilians hovered like bloated spirits of drowned sailors. Their natural slime coating glistened silver in the lurid light. Behind them, their coral village was sporadically outlined by current-driven waves of flowing plankton that broke along the eastern walls.

The itch was intense now, but the gate was close, and opening. I began picking up the Nautilians' clicks and grunts, which is their shorthand form of communication. I turned on the telepathy booster at my belt and caught excited pieces of thoughts being flung about like a frightened school of fish.

The Tyger finally got the idea, and as we raced through the open gate a welling of cold water at my back told me that whatever had stalked us was now sniffing at our heels.

Two Nautilians closed the gate as quickly as is possible against deep-water pressure. I reined the Tyger around and saw the horror.

He came out of black water like a cargo ship in a hurry. He was black on top, gray on the bottom and mean from his rapier teeth to his sickle-tail, which was forty feet further back. He was equipped with his own set of running lights like many deepers, and an escort of lesser predators. They swarmed about his great mouth as he tore into the fence. I heard bones crack. Not his. Disturbed sand rose about him.

Lord! Had I known what stalked us, I'd have fought the Tyger for a hole in the sand.

THE NAUTILIANS formed a half circle on our side of the fence. Their round violet eyes and hairless heads were fixed on the huge deeper. They had no weapons, but just continued to gather there, with more streaming in from the dark village like shadows of shadows.

About sixty had gathered when they hung their heavy blue-muscled arms with the backs of their wrists touching their neighbor's. Batwing hands slowly fanned the water. Gill slits along their necks strained as though they were preparing for some great effort.

It was a sight I'll never forget: That majestic terrible fish splintering the algae-covered bone fence with mindless fury, and the gentle people of Nautilus,

looking for all the world like attentive fans at some spectator sport.

The TP booster began amplifying some very strange sounds. An unseen signal was given among the people. The booster retreated to babbling static as an awful burning energy blackened the torn fence and focused upon the beast. It seared through his cheek and burned down to white bone. He screamed like a stricken whale and twisted away from the fence. His left side, passing in the unnatural lantern light, was a moving wall that bore the healed graffiti of past battles.

For the space of ten breaths there was nothing. The broken fence swaved. Dangling bones clapped.

Then the water was troubled again.

My Tyger had had enough. He shrugged me off his back with a sudden motion and headed for the village, reins loose under his belly.

I felt a gush of water as the deeper moved it before him. Then that awful head reappeared, this time trailing dark blood. His companions were already tearing the ragged flesh from his lips and cheek.

He came on like a natural disaster and the Nautilians closed ranks. An energy force sliced through a predator and hit the beast too low. It opened a surgical cut along his belly. Intestines protruded. But it did nothing to stop his charge.

An undersea battering ram, he burst through the fence. The Nautilians sent a last desperate energy force that glanced off his head, leaving charred skin, as he hit the group. The green people's screams were a hollow echo in the dark water. He slashed through their ranks as though this revenge was a small bitter thing and he thirsted through their dying flesh to find their souls. Their agony and fear came through the booster and was like my own.

I don't remember clinging to the fence through the carnage, but I must have. The beast raged and dark blood spread through the water till I could taste it.

The other predators retreated through the shattered fence like Jackals fighting over the dead.

Finally, the behemoth himself turned majestically. Our eyes met for one mind-shattering moment. An alien killer in alien seas. But the force of his telepathic power was blowing through some neatly stacked and carefully arranged chamber of my mind, and leaving them in considerable disarray till I thought my sanity would go babbling out the back door. If there was a message though, it was Piscilese and meant nothing to me. The fact of the attempt was another message.

He swam through the fence and back into the depths.

And of the sixty or so who had come to defend their village, perhaps half remained whole. And of the half who weren't so fortunate, perhaps twelve were still alive, although some might have been better off dead. Of course, many were missing.

I still had the sack of crystals at my belt. Whatever it represented had grown iron boots and was kicking down the gates of my conscience.

I will swallow air and fall to the desert sky. I will let the wind cave draw me to its black heart. The Song of the Current is dead. My spirit is lost among its rotting bones.

I sat in an isolated niche of the village marketplace and listened to the woman's mournful chant. The shrouded bodies of her husband and brother were among the dead. Hundreds of villagers hung quietly back from their daily business as the funeral procession moved by.

Farmers waited with skins of ripe sea plants ready to unload on the rock slab floor. Trays of shellfish and piles of white fillets were already laid out. There were cages of live Blackfish, to be bought and kept for future meals, and smaller cages of delicate blue and violet fish, to be bought and kept as pets. On a center stand were racks of treated skins and bone and coral jewelry.

But the Nauteleans' taste was Spartan. Most wore only brief loin skins, like sumo wrestlers. They were more interested in the craftsmen's hunting spears and slings.

This area of the village was a dead space, surrounded by coral hills that held off the currents. Caves and niches had been carved out of the slopes, also statues of their great warriors and various gods and goddesses. I noticed that Vauala, goddess of birth, plankton and the growing season was headless. Must have been a poor crop this year.

Visibility was good, about two hundred feet. I could see the great baleen traps in the distance, being milked for plankton by a team of workers.

There was a monolithic sculpture high on a hill that caught each stray seabreeze and turned it into a tingling along the lateral lines. I guess to a Nautelean it was music.

And the whole of this alien place was green and violet, the other colors having packed it in much nearer the surface.

I saw Llwl turn and break away from the procession. He was the first son of Menai, a revered Wind Listener who interprets the deadfall of fish from above and reads the past and future current paths. Nauteleans came from other villages to consult him on planting time and marriages. Llwl had taken on the job of mentor when first I'd arrived.

I continued to stare at the slow cortege as he swam over and settled beside me. He fidgeted, then opened one webbed foot, like a fan, and proceeded to scrape off the beginnings of a white fungus. His thoughts were on idle. Mine I held down with an iron boot.

Have you heard the bad news, VaHayl Michael? He addressed me royally, as befits God's Messenger Boy, in verbalized thought.

I'm afraid I am the bad news, Llwl, I returned the thought. The procession was fading into a distant sand pass that led to a deep-water cliff. I nodded toward it. *You'd better hurry.*

His nose slits expanded and contracted in a sigh. The great pale eyes lowered to his folded hands.

I meant about my sister.

Your sister? There were no women at the gate!

The Scrymmers made a looting raid on the village during the deeper attack. They carried off Lyella. He shrugged fatalistically and gazed at the disappearing procession. Our gods have always brought us adversity. We pray for good crops and the Sky Wanderers descend to devour them. We sacrifice the season's first fish, and the schools leave the fishing grounds. We build strong fences to keep out the deepers ... He turned his blunt-nosed face to me. I saw the deeper look at you, VaHayl, before he swam away. Did you command him to go?

Did I what? Jesus Christ! I called on my own god, in a fashion. Why'd I ever put Water Sports under hobbies on my resume? I thought of Fondsworth sitting out there with his hands folded over his fat gut, waiting for me to make friends and influence people. I closed my second eyelids and rubbed my hands over them.

Tell me about the Scrymmers, Llwl.

THAT SAME afternoon we left the village behind and followed the bottom to the cold still depths where nothing grows and the deadfall of fish litters the muddy floor. I took my compact power light and a Lazmatic handgun. Things I might have considered while out prospecting. What can I say?

Llwyl took a bone carving of the god, Ormn, who keeps an eye on travelers and clears an easy path for them. Boring job, that. I'd rather pay Hermes.

We left the Tygers behind. They get more unpredictable than usual at great depths. Guess they can't take the pressure.

What do these damn Scrymmers live on? I asked Llwyll as we followed the barren bottom down. Trails and tracks of sand crawlers wended their way to the edge of visibility.

He pointed to the rotting fish. *They are scavengers, VaHayl.*

I guess to a Scrymmer this was a pasture of fat steers.

As we continued down, the pressure became a vise into which I forced my head. I'd stop, equalize my ears, then as we went on, the vise would tighten again. The headache that had begun a hundred feet higher was now a tightening band across my temples. And the dizziness I felt coming on wasn't exactly conducive to a steady and firm grip on reality. I checked my depth gauge: five-hundred and twenty feet. Too much concentrated oxygen. My gills were set up for three-hundred or thereabouts.

How much further, Llwyll? I rubbed my numb hands through the skintights.

He paused, whistled shrilly. I didn't hear the rebound, but he did. *Perhaps another hundred feet down.*

Perhaps we won't make it!

He glanced at me and moved slightly away. *If you so choose, VaHayl.*

Oh, shit!

We came to a rocky ledge that fell away. Brown motes swirled in the thick light. I had the feeling that if I swam over the edge I'd fall. My Terran reflexes again. Then I realized that there was a slow downward drag. The uneasy stirrings of a strong cross-ocean current.

Above us the light was fading. I took in a deep breath and felt a wave of dizziness. I was suddenly aware of the crushing weight of water on our bodies. If I were to head for the surface fast, I'd be dead before I reached it. And not pleasantly, either. I watched a school of luminescent fish swim up through the muddy water. One large female carried a mouthless male clamped to her belly like a second tail.

Llwyl hung back and waited patiently for me to start down the cliff. There was a taste of ancient sand in my throat.

Why'd they take her anyway? I snapped the thought at him. *Do they expect to collect a ransom? Is that it?*

He was crouched on the ledge. He stared past it and slowly shook his head. *I don't know, VaHayl. If my sister lives, she does not call. There is only the Current Song.* His head sagged and the downward drag leaned him toward the edge.

The pain in my head was a steady pressure and dizziness came and went. I swam over the ledge and hung there, regarding the deeps. *C'mon, Llwyll, let's go find your sister.*

His lipless mouth cracked a clam smile. An alien gesture to his species, but he'd seen me do it.

Suffice to say that the last hundred and ten feet were the worst. When we hit the rippled bottom my depth gauge was pushing past six-hundred. I was fighting back waves of dizziness, but my ears were clearing nicely and that crushing

headache was gone.

The cold wasn't, though. And the current had hooked us and wanted us along for the ride.

We're about deep enough to warm our butts on Hell's own fires! I told Llwl.

Yes. *Though I am not familiar with the own fires of Hell, I have never been so deep, VaHayl, nor would I do this for a pleasure swim.*

Oh, great! "The neophyte leading the fool," as they say. *Which way?* I sent, defining my own role.

While Llwl whistled in the dark, I held onto a clump of spiny bottom growth and let the current string me out like a weather vane. Except where my light touched bottom, there was no color now, just a cold gray-white. Visibility was down to ten feet. I'd lost my neutral bouyancy as we descended, the greater pressure having compressed all gases, and was becoming very familiar with the mud.

Llwl pointed toward three o'clock. At that time we found what appeared to be a rock fort, about six feet high, though with visibility so poor, I couldn't say how large an area it enclosed.

We went over the wall and found shelter from the current. Also the Fishes' Graveyard, be there such a thing. Bones and shells were everywhere, some carefully piled.

Llwl went off to our left to check out a stone column. His laterals had picked up body movement coming from that direction. I scratched as I swam over a pair of five-foot wide holes in the ground and two large round rocks. Funny, how those rocks would just fit . . . If I didn't see them for Scrymmers at that point chalk it off to lightheadedness.

I shined my light into one hole. It widened under the surface opening into a chamber. I was halfway through the entrance when someone/thing shouted the thought:

Get out, you naked seaslug, there's no one home! Whatever you're selling, we don't want any. Or something that meant the same thing, it being a universal concept.

I backed out and swept my light in a circle: Just me, the cold, the dizziness and the rocks.

Where are you? I sent the thought.

The question, barnacle-brain, should be What are you? Seeing that we are certainly not flabby-fleshed bipeds!

I regarded the two rocks. One was bare and gray, with fungus growing up from its hidden base. The other, though, was like a magnet that had attracted every loose item in the sea. It was covered with bone and coral jewelry from which seaweed hung; with sponges and shreds of woven fishskin, spearheads, a piece of ceremonial black coral from a village wedding, and a pair of white infant booties shaped like tiny flippers — to name a few. These things were held on with some sticky substance to other things beneath, as new coral grows on old.

I swam closer to inspect it.

Get that shell-cracking light out of my eyes! The thought echoed through my head. I lowered the light and reached out a cautious hand, still unconvinced that the overdressed rock was the source of all that vitriolic verbalization.

Touch one small sponge of my carapace, you four-legged eel, and I will slice the meat off your bones as neatly as a newly molted shell!

I withdrew my hand and the light. *Crusty old bastard, aren't you?*

The sand around the rock's hidden base stirred. Two eyestalks emerged, then antennae and two mean looking claws, a pincer and a crusher. Spiny legs lifted the whole of it off the ground. I backflipped and got some water between

us.

The Scrymmer advanced, clicking his claws meaningfully. *How would you like to stay for lunch?*

Sure thing! I'm in the mood for baked crab, myself.

The Scrymmer scuttled closer to where I was settling in the mud.

You cannot invade my home, you half-starved bottom worm, and then attempt to squirm away!

You want satisfaction? I drew in a deep breath to gain some bouyancy, tolerated the added dizziness and rose to the occasion. I pointed to his shell. You make those things yourself, or did you relieve some village of them in the quiet of the night?

Of course! This is raidloot, you mindless jellyfish. I take pride in my hoard. I've worked hard, through many molting seasons to acquire it and keep it from my neighbors, and other thieves, like you! He raised a pincer claw and tucked a loose sponge back into place. But what would a poverty-stricken seaslug know of pride?

He advanced and I backflipped.

Your nakedness is a testimony of your indolent nature and worthless existence! You never did an honest night's raiding or scavenging in your whole useless life.

Making allowances for cultural differences, I swallowed some water with my pride.

How much honest raiding has he done? I gestured toward the silent bare Scrymmer.

Brjork? You criticize Brjork's nakedness? Barbarian! Shell-less Slime Snail! Brjork is a philosopher; a Scrymmer of vast and balanced wisdom. It has taken him contemplative cycles to molt his hoard and thus learn to live simply. And as a neighbor he is the finest, since he does not covet my own hoard.

Exemplary! Why don't you become his disciple and get rid of that pile of junk yourself? And perhaps some of your vices, like kidnapping.

Kidnapping! The thought screamed through my mind and I reflexively lowered the booster volume, then had to raise it again as he lowered his thoughts to a whisper.

You accuse me of the vile crime of kidnapping? Sooner would I swallow air and burst at the sky than tarnish my immortal soul with such a foul deed. He began to advance. I retreated to the only cover, Brjork's high shell, not wanting to use my gun on the relatively defenseless giant crab.

What would you call taking advantage of a deeper attack to swim off with my friend's sister?

I? I? He heaved himself clear out of the mud, causing a brown cloud to engulf him.

Yeah, you, you! I threw back the thought.

He paddled toward me, moving faster than I thought a ponderous crab could. I took shelter behind Brjork, still silent and motionless in the mud.

Now wait a minute, Scrymmer, I don't want to kill you. I don't even belong to your world. As I thought it I began to wonder if this entire incident wasn't just the hallucinatory ravings of an oxygen-poisoned brain. Verily, I pondered on it when I put a hand on Brjork's shell to lift myself and it lifted, hung like a tipped hat, and rolled lightly on its back, hollow as a drained cup.

Dead? The Scrymmer's incredulous thought floated to me. Brjork dead? We thought he was just meditating.

Perhaps he was meditating on Death.

I felt a hand on my arm and swung around, the gun half unholstered.

I have found Lyella, Llwy! sent.

Alive? A needless question, since his sense of relief was washing through my mind. He attempted another clam smile.

How did you expect to find her? the Scrymmer sent. *Are we such poor hosts that we eat our guests?*

Look, Scrymmer, I don't care what your menu consists of, or how much shit you accumulate. But stay off my back! Go write The Consumers' Guide to Crustacean Geegaws, OK?

VaHayl, do not distress him. Lyella —

You foul-mouthed mud-sucker! the Scrymmer sent. *She asked for sanctuary during the raid. I granted it. She agreed to bring me the finest hoardables in exchange for a home here and the choicest meat from my scavenges. You shall not take her away! How can I achieve happiness while still there are bare places on my shell?*

I see no bare places, Scrymmer, Llwy!' thought came gently.

Look, you fool! Look closely. You will see gray.

Oh, for Chrissake! I sent. Lift your eyestalks. There's more to this world than the muck you're mired in!

He extended his claws and opened them menacingly. *I am not Brjork, Flesher.*

And Lyella is not one of your hoardables. I'll send you a Sears' catalogue when I get home. C'mon, Llwy!

HE LED THE way. Behind us the Scrymmer was calling on his neighbors, requesting a gathering of forces. We'd cross that referendum when we got to it.

It was getting dark, and cold was seeping down to my bones. The dizziness was a thing I was learning to live with. Llwy! stopped by another Scrymmer hole. Down in the dark pit the sea-green lady was quietly curled.

Lyella? Llwy!' whispered thought drifted. *Come out, please. We're going home now.*

She turned round colorless eyes upward. The slit of her mouth was down. She was Llwy!' twin except for the small bare mammaries and the lighter build.

You go home, Llwy!, tell them you found me dead and sent my body to the current.

Would you ask me to look into old Menai's face, and your husband, Hestro's, and tell them that Lyella lies rotting where the scavengers bare her bones? By the Life Goddess, they both love you more than Mother Sea!

She lowered her head and drew up her knees against her chin.

What has happened, sister, that can be more terrible than this self-imposed exile?

I flinched from her sudden burst of despair.

Oh, Llwy!, I would have taken my own life if not for the unborn child!

... Hestro's child? I did not think —

No! Crippled Hestro will never be a father. The child of a passing merchant, Llwy!. A bastard child.

Llwy!' shock came through like a wave encountering a rock. His sister felt it and began to sob.

VaHayl, Llwy! sent, VaHayl, I — I would not ask for myself, but ...

Hell, Llwy!, I'd help if I could, but for the last time I'm not God's ...

Or was I? Could I be?

I lowered my thought to a non-verbal level and let them mumble sotto cervello.

Suppose I sent Lyella, via heaven's chariot, but let's call it a space taxi, up to

God, known familiarly as Fondsworth, to be forgiven and shrived; that is, hypnotized and aborted.

Could be a happy reunion with friends and family for the poor amnesia victim. Could be the answer to all our problems.

I thought I heard a scraping sound, not uncommon on the ocean floor. Or was it Scrymmers approaching through the brown haze, scraping past each other like blind ants on a forced march? Could they have shielded their thoughts and quietly surrounded us? I swam about five feet off the bottom and described a circle with my light.

Could be!

Well, mud-sucker, my personal nemesis, Ol' Scuttlebutt sent, I'll be wearing those hoardables around your middle before long. They might even cover the remaining gray. I heard the sandpaper equivalent of a Scrymmer chuckle.

I drew the Lazmatic. Llwyll! He was already out of the pit. Can we outswim them?

I could. You could not. Lyella refuses to.

Then grab her by something and start dragging!

Listen, Scrymmers, I sent, this hoardable you see in my hand is a weapon. There was no time for a lecture on the Lazmatic's capabilities. Instead I demonstrated by frying the baby booties off Scuttlebutt's shell, which had about the same effect as stealing somebody's custom planet-hopper.

He saw red, Ol' Scuttlebutt did, down where there is no red. With a sound such as ancient pioneers must have heard, just before burning arrows hit the log walls, they raised themselves off the bottom and swam toward us.

Goddammit, Llwyll, why are you still down in the hole?

I am trying to convince Lyella —

I fired a warning shot, "above their heads," as they say, only they had no heads, ducked into the pit, grabbed Lyella's right arm and began an upward trudge. God, she was heavy! And slippery, too. Between us and the Scrymmers we'd stirred up a London fog. Zero visibility and breathing sand. If I could only get above it, I'd let the current help us on our way.

I was breathing heavily and dizzily, trying to maintain my numb-handed grip on Lyella when the green bitch started fighting me.

I cannot go back! Oh, please, VaHayl, let me go! Please! Her panicked thoughts and terror were stampeding through my mind. She was clawing at my skintights, which can take a lot more than that. I continued doggedly upward. Until she kicked out hard; blindly perhaps, but with the accuracy of a guided heat missile.

Seeing whole galaxies before my eyes, I doubled over and let her go. A giant vise clamped down on my left calf. I shot off its handle and heard a mental scream of Scrymmer anguish. Shit, he'd grow a new claw, more than I could say for my leg.

The hell with the green twins, I decided, it was time to get out! I shot another Scrymmer between the eyestalks as they emerged from the brown soup. I held my breath as pieces of burned shell and other things drifted around me.

Now which way was up, I wondered. Suspended like a fly caught in a bowl of cream of mud soup, I couldn't tell. I could drift down, touch bottom and take off from there, but the Scrymmers weren't allowing any time outs.

There was grit in my mouth and pain in my groin and cold in my bones and a swirling before my eyes that was not only from the stirred mud.

I was moving with outstretched hands when I encountered the rock wall. Seemed like a good place for a stand. I settled with my back against it and called Fondsworth, wondering if he'd consider this "extenuating circumstances".

After a moment's pause, in which I fired at scraping sounds in the soup, he deigned to answer.

"Michael, old lad, it's about time you reported in. I was beginning to wonder if you'd made it to the gate, after all, or if I were tracking you inside the belly of a fish?"

"Don't ask dumb questions, Fondsworth, just send down the taxi, fast!"

"Then I take it the Nautilians have signed over the mining rights?"

"I said don't ask dumb questions! I'm dying down here, Fondsworth, I'm about to be eaten alive by the Crab People."

As though to make a point, another Scrymmer, a Kami-Kaze pilot, this one, swept down from my right and went for my throat with his crusher claw. I twisted aside, fumbled the gun into my left hand and shot him point blank. There was a sizzling sound and the taste of fried fish.

"Michael, are you still there? If so, I suggest that you return to the village and see to those mining agreements."

"I can't go back alone, even if I *could* make it . . . which I don't think I can."

I explained briefly about my having led the deeper to the village, and about Llwyll and Lyella refusing to return.

"The Nautilians are patient people, Fondsworth, but they've idealized me and deified me. If I let them down again they're liable to follow the Terran patterns and crucify me!

" . . . Fondsworth? Did you hear me?"

"Yes, certainly, Michael. I was just considering what effect a monotheistic religion would have on the Nautilians. With our missionaries to guide their spiritual growth, instill a work ethic; perhaps a supply of local labor for the mines . . ."

"Fondsworth, you son of a bitch! If you think I'm going to play martyr just to make you look good with UTW, I'll tell these people to deal with the Alterians first!"

"It was just a thought, Michael, a fleeting thought."

"That's good, because —"

"But I do wonder when you will give up this childish obsession you have with your own well-being, and recognize your responsibilities as a soldier fighting for the UTW cause?"

"When Hell's covered with the white fluffy stuff! What do you think I've been doing down here? Signing autographs and chasing mermaids? These damn lateral lines don't work an' the gills won't compensate for depths greater than —"

"Yes, yes, of course. Well, good luck, old lad, call for the taxi when you have those papers signed.

"Oh, by the way, I do hope you manage to accomplish your mission without the help of an 'Annedroid Freak.'"

There was a click, louder than a bang or a whimper. "Fondsworth?" I said to the dead transmitter.

It's strange how the brain doesn't register exhaustion as such, underwater; just muscle aches, a reluctance to move and labored breathing. I guess lack of body weight fools the ol' gray matter. It was so easy to let go. The sea cradled me; the crickets clicked and scraped.

I jumped.

The Scrymmers must have regrouped for another charge. I wondered about Llwyll. Had he waited stoically, perhaps scraping at a fungus growth, while the overgrown crabs tore him into bite-size chewables? Was Lyella back in the pit, bemoaning her one-night-stand with the traveling salesman?

Speaking of stands, last ones mostly, I set the Lazmatic for maximum power and waited.

A THOUGHT drifted my way.

VaHayl, it is Llwl. Please lower the killing light.

Llwl's dead and digested by now, Scrymmer.

No! This is Llwl. I have made a bargain with the Scrymmers. Please, VaHayl, put down the weapon and allow me to approach.

Sure. Which direction?

... You do not believe me?

I believe you! Come ahead. I probed mentally, with the TP booster on full power. But now the Scrymmer's thoughts were shielded. I caught the rag end of a whispered mental image ... behind me!

I swung, aiming the gun over the wall and ran into a fist that put to rest my troubles for awhile.

My next thought wasn't my own.

VaHayl, forgive me. How do you feel?

I blinked into the blackness of a sea night. "W-where's my light?" I mumbled, realized I was speaking and switched to thinking.

Here. Llwl wrapped my fingers, which were probably as green as his, around the handle. I turned it on. A comforting tunnel of yellow light lit the slick rippled mud and fungus-covered gray wall — sans Scrymmers. A flat bottom fish rose up and flapped, bewildered, before the light. I knew how he felt.

How do you feel? Llwl asked.

Like a fool.

I have made a bargain with them, VaHayl.

How'd you manage to stop your thinking process long enough to get that close?

VaHayl, if you will give the Scrymmers all your hoardables, especially the killing light, they will allow you to leave. I have decided to stay here with Lyella.

You know, Llwl, if I'd detected you a second sooner, you'd be fried crab bait now.

He nodded. You have killed a few of them.

Only a few? Too bad.

I caught his sideward glance. Yes, VaHayl. It is best, though, if you do not return to my village.

You mean they might begin to doubt that I was sent from heaven?

He shook his head quickly. No, they would still believe, as I do, but ...

Yeah, I know, I've seen the smashed idols.

Then you will return to the god you serve?

Suppose we all go visit heaven?

... Before death?

Instead of death. Mine, anyway.

Llwl, the god I serve could remove Lyella's sin, and her memory of it. You could take her back to your village as a victim of amnesia from the kidnapping. She'd believe it. So would everyone else.

And the child, VaHayl, what of the child?

I thought on artificial wombs and accelerated growth.

In three months you'll find it at the gate, a foundling cast out by some other village. Do you think you could convince a childless couple like Lyella and Hestro to adopt it?

He gave me another clam smile. That should not be too difficult.

Now in return . . . I unzipped a side pocket, extracted the legal papers. As the first son and successor of a recognized leader of your species, you have the power to legally represent your people. All you need do is sign next to the X. I offered him a waterproof pen and held the light over his shoulder.

He eyed me strangely.

The god I represent, sent I, wants his angels to gather transparent rocks around the Blue Grotto, and anywhere else they might find his favorite geological specimens. But he needs written permission!

He took the papers and shuffled through them. You know, VaHayl, I am beginning to wonder if you are God's Messenger, after all.

Now he wonders!

Whatever I am, Llwl, I can do this thing for Lyella.

He nodded and pointed to my crude map of the grotto. This is Scrymmer territory. You must deal with them.

I laughed then. It started with a chuckle and grew into a laugh that I was powerless to stop. A release of tension? The last convulsive throes before freezing to death?

Or a case of irony?

Because I thought it was acknowledged somewhere behind the stars; I thought a divine chuckle echoed back through my head.

Then I called Fondsworth, still laughing.

"Break out the beads and costume jewelry," I told him. "We're going to open a 'Going Out of Business' store!"

I STOPPED laughing about six months later. By then, Lyella's kid was romping with the other tadpoles; the mining operations were in full swing, really "raking it in," to coin a phrase. My boss at UTW Central wore a smile in his voice whenever we communicated. Llwl had given up his Wind-Listener apprenticeship. He was organizing the Nautilean miners into a united front against UTW's imperialistic reflexes. The Val Tirian's destiny would no longer be in the hands of headless goddesses and messengers without a message.

And Fondsworth retired to open the plushiest restaurant that ever flashed a neon sign along the spacetrade routes. But he himself became a recluse who seldom left his private ship. What he did on board, no one really knew.

As for myself, I stayed on Nautilus too long, as it turned out, and lost every credit of my share in the mines. Ol' Scuttlebutt and his crusty crew had learned to play a mean game of poker! ●

Gene Kilczer

- I live with my family in the Jemez Mts. of northern New Mexico, just outside of Los Alamos, where I work. It's a driving job and so my mind is free to roam the inner landscapes, as they say. Some of the things I find there, mostly under stubborn mental rocks, I put down on paper. When I have gathered enough weird fauna, I arrange them into a pattern and call it a story.

Of all the SF writers I admire, R. Zelazny is the one who's most influenced my work.

Of all the things I'd rather do than write,

motorcycle riding and skin diving are right up there in front.

The former is great on the winding mountain roads of the Jemez, the latter is impossible.

One cannot have it all.

It must have been somewhere around the year 2070 when I conceived my plan.

It occurred to me, quite capriciously, like an entirely random Eureka gestalt, that the world was tragicomic, and that men treated unimportant things importantly; and that, conversely, key-critical events were sloughed off easily, though perhaps in a deeper spirit of unconscious fear, a fear that was too grave to meet face-on. My plan was to assemble the cumulative insights of all the secretly beloved *savants* of the time, and demonstrate that as few as 300 people of the ten billion on the planet really knew what was going on.

Of course, I was one of the 300.

Cursed with the infusive carrier-poison of Judaism, I could only look with wonder on the regal Nordics, the inscrutable Orientals, the oral French, anal Germans, and the genital Americans, and bewail my grievous fall. Accident of birth had predestined me toward certain fates, nor could I compensate for my unimpressive stature and physiognomy, except through the most blatant and charismatic and artistic displays. Had I not had artistic outlets, surely I would have been a killer of some sort. Awareness of the psychodynamics of sex-role development led me naturally to androgeny, and my empathy with females was substantial; however, I responded to immutable hormonal cues, and to this extent I was prone-dominant-intromissive in postures. Early in my vulnerability I grew painfully aware of territoriality, striated muscular strength, the power of eye-contact and vocal nuance, pecking orders, division of labor, distribution of societal goods and services, Machiavelli, Marx and Hegel, de Tocqueville, and Buddha. My mind burgeoned with data storage and retrieval bits, syntactic carbon chains of non-

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verbal symbols, spiced and spiked by pure hormonal washes of adrenalin.

I learned quiescent biofeedback at an early age, and picked my way cautiously through libertinism (no easy task!), asceticism, stoicism, altruism, and cynicism. I could lie adrift in swells of nihilism, and then rebound with guileless displays of spontaneity and candor, a true philosophical optimist. I could look with compassion on the face of the ugly duckling and with vague hostility on the face of beauty. I wondered if beauty was meant to be desecrated, and if Thanos, by its very definition, would forever dominate Eros. I invented a God, just as all religions had, because I needed something other than chance to justify my existence. I ritualized regularly, doing varieties of hagiolatry, drank blood, ate flesh in ceremony, sang, played, preached, listened, reinforced, extinguished, faltered, triumphed, and faltered yet again. I wrestled with my conclusion that the world was basically uncontrolled, and that some great force must have made the world partially immune to the effects of its own self-destructive bent.

So what was I to do in my inconsequentiality? Lacking the genetic gifts of great leaders, how was I to make my mark, how was I to nail down my credibility, to shake the world, as did Darwin, Freud, Billy Carter, Bob Hope, Pele, and Steve Garvey? The answer was obvious: I was to use the standardized communicative barter system of *language*, and it would have to be graphic, boldly graphic, hyperbolic, with arresting poetic licensure, and done with skill that would illumine the world so that all could see what I saw; viz: the harmless, routine, innocuous illusions of the future, the slow turn and evolvement of events that was to impace on us all in ways that would be as diverse as our abilities to understand them. For what does it matter if a leaf falls, or a baby turtle is caught by a kiva gull inches from the safety of the sea, or a plane crash kills 500 people, or a ferry capsizes, or a gentle soul is abused by a cruel one? Are not life and death part of the same process, and is not the one just as capricious as the other? But I wallow in existential despair.

My own life in the year 2070 could be viewed in a microcosmic sense: I had to eat and drink, I needed shelter, I needed to excrete and sleep, and beyond that I needed a great deal of generalized reinforcement. I was emotionally thin-skinned, and therefore anxious to generate and supply myself with happy experiences. And, to these ends, I ate gourmet foods, covered my body with expensive clothing, lived in a plush skyscraper tower apartment, took very careful notice of my physical feelings, and sought out friends that would be kind to me. Far more than most of the people I knew, I was fairly well the master of my ship.

For whatever else Jews are, they are rarely poor, and my father had left me a comfortable fortune. I was, by virtue of this one giant fact, able to control my environment to a marked degree. A good meal makes a brave man, and I kept myself well-fueled and sated. My clothing immediately marked me as privileged — hah! Privilege! It was more pure raw chance, but I was noticed and deferred to, as well as resented. My turboPorsche flyer stood out in the air-tunnels swarming with ordinary Ford flitters and Honda aviettes, and I had a fast-lane azimuth code, so that lesser vehicles gave way to me. I was in no danger of vandals or nomads or guerillas, since I carried advanced weaponry both on my person and in my flyer. The credit line left to me by my father thus allowed me to purchase a certain degree of invincibility. It was extrinsic invincibility, yes, like a man hiring bodyguards, but it worked, and it gave me the time and freedom to assemble my book of visions. And so, while Russian peasants still scratched at their land with wooden rakes, and the Los Angeles flea market teemed with emaciated hawkers of scavenged products, and while the Cardinals poisoned each other in their Vatican cells, and President Onassis IV fought the ancient U.S. Congress, I was

safe in my Malibu tower, at least until my credit line ran out.

There had been some interesting discoveries during the years 1970-2070 (cancer vaccine, antigravity craft, walkaround holographic television, synthetic food pills, topologic soccer, 3-d xeroxing, cloning), but the anatomy and physiology of the human body hadn't evolved very much, except that we were shorter and weaker than ever. We were all partially bionic, though, and to this extent, we were superimposing prosthetic life on natural life. I was trying to leap ahead, far ahead, in my own harmless-illusion way, and see if there was anything common to the physical and mental parameters of the 300 people I hoped to sample for my ultimate compendium of harmless illusions. Do not be misled or offended by my continuing use of the term "harmless." It is meant to counteract the human tendency to react to evil with hysteria. And, while a knife held to your throat would likely engender autonomic hysteria, the event is totally without significance in the larger assumptive worlds of community, nations, planets, galaxies, and whatever else there is. Life is cheap in some places, like in the Orient (life has always been cheap there), but life is inordinately precious in our old U.S. I am a living example of this: I go to a lot of trouble and expense to keep my Judaic ass intact.

SO! MY FIRST CALL was to Ellen Harlison, a wonderfully mellowed and soured ancient of some 140 years, a tiny, spritely woman, strong-jawed and agile, with bright, devouring eye-contact, and a psychic metabolism like burning anthracite coal nuggets over an air-fed hibachi. Ms. Harlison was 87% bionic, but had chosen to leave her face untouched. It was difficult to know when you were addressing a natural human organism and when you were addressing an auditory sensor these days. I asked a robot cop for directions once, he gave them, and then addended "you can't miss it." I thought this eerily human. Ms. Harlison's forte was androgeny, and she held forth on this subject come hell or high water. Ask her the time of day and she would deliver a lecture on androgeny. I was reminded of the ancient comedians, Bob and Ray, who, far back in the 1930s, staged investigative journalism interviews in which the questions were complexly senseless, and the replies senselessly complex, and quite unrelated to the question. The effect was humorous, though the precise elements of the humor remained elusive and gossamer-furtive. Ms. Harlison's eyes had lost some of their intensely personal look, what with the bionics and all, but I could feel that she was still coercing the bionics to do her will, and that whenever a new implant was placed in her body, it immediately became drenched with her *sui generis* personality. Her antigen-antibody reaction was probably like piranhas attacking a suckling pig, and if one could impute anthropomorphism to an implant, it would be easy to imagine, say, a fulcrum-surrogate being told by Ms. Harlison that it damn well better work right or get out. She lived in a geriatric spire, surrounded by cubes and tapes and discs and books and cassettes. I saw a provost robot in a wall niche and knew that the old girl must be getting troublesome. Not many citizens required this level of monitoring. There were ancient posters and calendars on the walls, and the place had the look of very orderly clutter, the best way to live, I always thought. She was smoking a fat black cigar and blowing smoke through her ears and through the airscoop on her throat. I had a hell of a time getting her to answer my standardized question; *Viz: what do you think all futurists have in common?*

After four androgeny mini-lectures, she croaked out "existential anxiety," then "psychopathic deviance, social introversion, paranoia, megalomania —"

"Wait," I said, though the recording cube was getting it all, "I thought that

would be a tough question, one you'd have to marinate on —”

“Pterodactyl shit,” she said, “the question is simple as a turd in a punchbowl. Futurists are original, planful, supra-rational, resourceful, talkative, unconventional, understanding, zany —” I realized that she was taking a trait-listing approach, and I wasn't sure that's what I wanted, but then, she was number one on my list, and there was no way of knowing how the other *savants* would respond to the question. I might have known she would do something crazy: she belched a loud laryngeal-bionic sound and de-fluxed her torso sheath, revealing her nude.

“Ain't I a pretty sight, laddie?” she croaked, like the all-time archetypal witch-crone, and she bobbed her tiny pectoral nubs before me. Her torso was stitched in cross-hatched bands, as if she wore a permanent set of bandoliers. An aortic pump bulged in her left side, like a slow bubble in a lava pool. Below her dextral breast, a beautifully transparent porthole showed well-lighted vascular filters, and a colostomy rig jutted from her stomach like a spigot on an ale-barrel.

“Ain't I a right pretty sight,” she repeated, “you want to see the rest of me, boy? You want to see the real sacral goodies?” I didn't know what to do, the sight was equivocal in its revolt value, but I had been warned about her. I didn't want her to strip anymore. I was certain she had hermaphroditic prostheses, and I didn't feel up for big grossities so early in the morning. I gave her what I strove to project as an admiring look, and reached for the absinthe decanter.

“God, I hope I last as long as you have,” I said, saluted her with glass, and drank. She snuffled a bit and fluxed her sheath back on.

“Adventurous we are,” she said, as if the interlude had not happened, “bristling alert, arrogant, dominant, forceful, foresighted — hah! Imaginative, independent, anarchists — anarchy is a tame word for us — insightful, inventive, luxuriant in our leisure, saintly in our androgeny — hey, you want to do anything sexy, boy?” Her tone sounded sadistic, and I could in no way perceive her as an inviting piece of ass. She probably had serrated ridges on her stalk, was sure as hell sodomitic, and had mousetraps in her snatch to boot.

“You flatter me, my dear grand dame,” I said, standing and bowing, “but my veneration of you so transcends sex that I would be obliterated by the sweet degradation of coupling with you.” She didn't pay a bit of attention to me.

“Ah'll jes' corn-pone you a leetle afore you go,” she said, lapsing into crude dialect, “you'll lak it.” She de-fluxed her sacral sheath and spun the abdominal rheostat that diverted blood into her genital stalk. I signaled to the provost robot.

“The old bitch is getting out of hand,” I said, “better put her under.” The old lady opened her mouth to revile me, but the robot vectored out the constraining forcefield and froze her in place. I left, wondering if the next *savant* would be any better or worse.

BERTRAM GOLDBERG was 137 years old and 62% bionic. He had written 400 old books, 100 audio cassettes and trivid cubes, and his hologram was in great demand on what was left of the lecture circuit. He looked like Jesus with a salt and pepper beard. He lived in a concentric suite on the 192nd deck of a geriatric spire set in the plasticrete plains of old Oakland. He welcomed me, graciously, and we spent some time admiring the view of the spire-studded plains, and the flash of pediatric flitters outside the windows. It was Saturday, and the kids were coming to visit. Goldberg had five children, 20 grandchildren, 40 great-grandchildren, and 60 great-greats, and they were all due at his suite in about two hours. He said that the kids usually paraded past him, as if he were on display in a museum, and that the few who knew him well would stay and talk

awhile.

"But I suppose I am rather akin to a musty artifact in a museum," he sighed, and it was a sigh of contentment.

"What do you think all futurists have in common?" I asked him, and he waited a very long time before answering.

"Basic inhibition," he said, thoughtfully, "internalization of psychic energy, a kind of complexity — no, we are rather like sieves, or variably permeable membranes — we are verbalistic osmosifiers, ration-makers, distillers, tincture-makers, even alchemists."

"Do you think all writers, all the futuristic writers and thinkers have wounded psyches?"

"I read that in *Playboy* in 1970," Goldberg laughed, "turned out that the production people there were jealous of the writers, so they put together a satiric, roast-level test called 'Is Your Psyche Wounded Enough to Become a Writer?' I suddenly realized that I, too, had read the article; indeed, that this exact memory engram had triggered my question.

"It is certainly true that people will write down things that are too painful for them to say," Goldberg continued, and while people may fare badly in verbal interaction, especially when emotionally aroused, they can release their stored emotionality in writing, and the release is accepted, even sanctioned and prized by the society."

"But almost half of most people never read books at all."

"Yes, but even the omnipresence of the media impacts but little on them. In the early days of television, it was estimated that by the time a child started school at age six, he had already logged some ten-thousand hours of television watching! But did this immersion in visual media change him very much? Not nearly so much as might have been predicted. Whatever changes there were were not particularly observable. Exposure to television surely did not facilitate children learning to read and write."

"Do you believe that one picture is worth a thousand words?"

"That's an early mass market saying, a saying that appealed hugely to the semi-literate, because it reinforced their values. Of course, it depends on the picture and the words. I think the key, however, is the universality, the relative universality of language. Ultimately, language is the mechanism of inhibition and mediation, and all futurists know this."

"The pen is mightier than the sword, then?"

"I am convinced of it. The wrath of the sword is quick and cruel, but the power of language — of manifestos, of contracts, documents, tabloids, exposes — has an inherent permanence. And, also, writing in architectural, it is visual placement of symbols. Try reading Polish or Chinese and you will marvel at the variety of symbols available to us. Futurists know that they are placing linear sequences of shapes in front of people, and, according to their individual skills or art or craft or whatever, they hope to impact on the readers."

"So, futurists share some common motives? Some, ah, concern for the readers?"

"Alas, not. We cannot escape the primacy of the economic motive. We write because we are paid seven cents a word, or ten, or fifty, or because we are advanced a quarter-million to write a book that the publishers know will sell ten million copies."

"And do we write because we are Jewish?"

"Aye, we do!" he replied very quickly. "We are both chosen and accursed. We are given intellective insights that still more heighten our vulnerability, and we

lack the tough hides to be successful politicians. Our words are territorial because our bodies are not. We scribble because we are loathe to fight, or even to snarl, or vent anger."

"So, the futurists internalize natural aggression?"

"Yes, although I am not sure what is natural anymore. Aggression used to facilitate survival, but this is no longer true. Both good and bad are admixed in the dilemma, as in most things. The internalization of aggression now seems an evolutionarily adaptive trait. It keeps us all alive, if angry, but the anger does not dissipate of itself."

"There are surely writers who have been characterized as angry."

"Yes, but I think that futurist writers are more in touch with their feelings, and I do not believe they are basically hostile. Anger resides in the bosom of the fool — I forget who said that — but, wherever it resides, it must seek expression. An organism can harbor a certain amount of input, and beyond that there is sensory overload. Writing is a sure-fire way to ward off sensory overload."

"Then writing is, ah, *psychotherapeutic*?"

"Yes, but only to those who have the ability to do it. Butchers rarely feel anger because they cut fresh meat all day. They live with flesh and blood and the cruelly eviscerative blade. The athlete dissipates his strength in the game, and the scholar in his mentation. Many of the sodden humanic masses never dissipate their aggression at all, and are puzzled when ulcers burn white holes in their guts, or when they lie awake all night. The musician creates his harmonies, expending energy in the process, and the mastery of his art is never complete. Musicians, artists, and writers live longer than anybody. . . ."

"And who dies young?"

"Corporate executives, physicians, the police and military. . . ." A bright orange Oldsmobile aviette clamped onto the ridge outside the plastiglass, and several children inside it waved.

"The first of the thundering progenic herd," Goldberg smiled, "bless the little creeps — er, darlings." The kids were admiring my turboPorsche.

"Is there any one g-factor?" I asked, getting ready to leave. "Any one generic, pure, specific faculty that you feel all futurist savants have in common?"

"We can all look at the emperor and see that he has no new clothes," Goldberg said, as the egress port irised, and the kids vaulted and somersaulted into the room. "Our visions are penetrating." He paused, and looked away. "And we are, with God's help, *Judaic*."

GOTTLIEB MUELLER lived in a cave in Pacific Palisades. I landed my flyer on a grassy bluff and began to climb the ladder up to the entrance. A beautiful naked girl greeted me. She had a pingpong paddle in her hand, and her body was ripe, tanned, and exquisitely musky with light perspiration. She bobbed her breasts at me and disappeared back into the cave. Remnants of whipped cream were on her breasts and I knew immediately what Gottlieb had been doing. He had been doing it for at least 160 of his now 180 years. He was the oldest of the great futurist writers, and, to my mind, the very best of all. The cave was luxuriously fitted out with environmental walls and deck and ceiling and a huge desk dominated the center of the area. Although the cave entrance itself was small and crude, the splendor of the inside attested to Mueller's rich credit lines. He came out of the darkness far at the rear of the room and castered toward me on silent locomotor pods. His body was encased in a flexible cylinder from the waist down, and he looked not unlike a life-size chessman. He was bald, with a long, wispy

white beard, hooded eyes, and there was whipped cream on his mouth. He did not speak to me, but handed me a pingpong paddle, and castered over to the table. He played a steady, silent, Zen-type game, and skunked me 11-0 twice. He drank a Pernod like it was water. He wore a tattered sweatshirt with the words Xerxes Society on it. I learned later that the shirt was 160 years old.

"My work is done," he said in a deep gravel-voice, "and I weary of interrogation. Old futzers like me should be left in peace. So, have a drink, and get on with it. You want a girl? Careful, you might sit on one, the place is crawling with girls." An Oriental dancer glided past and bowed her lovely head to me.

"Thank you, no," I replied, looking around at the wondrous cave, "but this is the way I want to spend my golden years." I guess I just plain gaped at the plush trappings all around. I saw yet another naked girl far off in a corner on a divan.

"The mystery of woman!" Mueller sang out, "Christ, I've lived a century and a half, damn near two centuries, and women still mystify me."

"I know you've had several wives."

"Several! God, don't you know I had ten before I turned one-hundred? Leeches, every damn one of them, too. I've been running a computerized alimony disbursement center for years, for Christ's sake."

"How do you explain your, ah, success?"

"I don't explain it at all. I never *explain* anything. What is it you want? I hear you're putting together some sort of book."

"Yes, a compendium of wisdom, I hope. I'm trying to get all the important futurist writers to contribute. May I put the question to you?"

"Make it short."

"What do you think all futurists have in common?" Mueller had subtle kinesthetic control of the sacral cylinder that held him, and it bent perfectly well as he eased down into a chaise-pod. He rustled about briefly, adjusting himself like a bird in a nest, and I could see that beneath the finely burnished surface of his sheath there were stirrings of sorts, as if real thighs and calves and feet were indeed just beneath the layer of flexible metal or whatever it was. He reached for another Pernod.

"God knows," he answered the question after a long wait, and his deep voice trailed away into a chuckle, "we're *driven*. Yes, we *have* to do what we do. And we are always giving, don't you see. I used to think I was an exeption to that, but I'm not. We spiel out pretty words, or ugly ones, we put together neat boxcar chains of scribbles, we shift and switch, parlay and synchronize, polish and hone, cosmetize and gloss — God, how Hemingway used to agonize over his sentences — writing, writing, re-writing. I don't agonize, I *luxuriate*." He downed the drink in a quick motion and I didn't see him swallow. It looked like dashing fluid down a drain. "I think futurists have a cosmic view of things," he continued, "we see too much, we shit on sacred cows, I guess you could say we are anal-expulsive, and, whether you buy Freud or not, that implies that we have deep hostilities."

"And do you feel deep hostilities?"

"Why, yes. How can one avoid them? I was yanked out of a warm womb, my parents were Nordic, which is to say, *idiots*. My brain was so open, so full, and yet so sponge-like, so receptive, that everything impacted on me with concussive, and then absorptive force. I was capable of precocious acts at an early age, but was steamrollered by the mediocrity around me. My excellence only served to amplify the relative stupidity of people who came in contact with me. I was too good in everything I did. I could never fit in with family, with church, with patriotism, with the work ethic, with marriage and kids and mortgage and nest-building."

"So futurists are a dissatisfied lot?"

"Yes, but we don't bitch, we don't moan, or wear bleeding hearts on Byronic sleeves — hah! We're a tough-minded lot. And, in the finest sense of the word, we are *amenuenses* of the world, we are the *scribes*, the recorders of history, and of everything. Life zaps by, it is always speeding, flowing, galloping, a garbage truck rolling backwards down a hill; but we writers arrest the flow of time, we preserve, we capture, we immortalize life. We validate experiences and pass the validity on to the readers. Through our skill, or art, or whatever you may call it, we are able to let inside our heads, to let them know how it is in there. To my mind, written communication is the closest we ever come to knowing how it feels to be somebody else. When we read, we absorb the humanity of the writer, we sniff his personality scent, his spoor, we see into his soul, even as he sees into ours. We give expression to the deepest pain people feel, and in so doing, ease the pain."

"So futurists are healers, of a sort?"

"I never really know. How can one know such things? We think we are. There are times, there have been times, when I have felt omnipotent, times when I felt I had penned great truths, soaring aphorisms, maxims of stunning power. But I could never measure their effects. Could I write a book that would end wars? Of course I couldn't. It would be far easier to write a book that would *start* a war. The cruel men, the so-called great leaders, typically destroy books. Books are dangerous, they are repositories of wisdom, readers of books are not to be trusted, do you see what I mean. Books inspire independent thought and action, they are revelatory, they expose us in our pomposity and desperate pride. They have an humbling, egalitarian effect, they get to the raw guts of things."

"And, is this not, ah, good?" I looked to make sure my tape cube was on. Mueller bit into a small white onion as if it were a parfait, and chewed, noisily.

"Again, who is to say? If books were read by everybody, and if they made changes in people, the good and the bad would still be mixed together. Kindness is not on the upswing in our world, at least not from where I sit, and we don't seem to have learned anything from the past. God, how many wars to end all wars have we had? I don't remember — six? ten?"

"Then perhaps futurist writers should attempt to solve the problem of aggression in man."

"Yes, that is surely true. I have my own ideas about that, as well as about sex and politics and religion; and all the rest —"

"I'd like to hear them."

"I'll need to re-fuel," he said, his voice deep and jocular, and he reached for yet another Pernod. A shapely nude girl appeared and bent to kiss his cheek. He bit and sucked her breast and she left.

"Women," he sighed, "one day I'll write the definitive treatise on women — bah! No I won't! It's impossible. By the way, I believe that all futurists are *androgeous* — that is to say, we transcend the accident of sex-role identity. We are at once both sensitive lovers and abominable comrades."

"You don't mean active bisexuality."

"No, though a man's sexual likings are of no concern to me. To me, the androgeny is entirely mental. In all my years, I have never been sexually attracted to men. Men give off a scent, maybe it's hormonal, who knows, but it is a warning in a sense, a psychic-olfactory demarcation of territory. By God, I am salt and pumice and acid, and women are sugar and flesh and ambrosia. I can empathize with the women who resent being split-tailed. It doesn't keep me from trying to get my cock inside them, but I feel for them, nonetheless."

"So futurists are deeply aware of sex."

"Hell, yes, it permeates us, it infuses everything. And, after all, it is the life process itself. Where would we be without the ripe, planetary ova and the comet-spirits of semen? I knew a young writer from Philadelphia — I forget his name — Dardner Gozols, I believe it was, and his idea was that writing was ejaculatory, that the thousands of words he plied onto paper were actually spermatozoa —"

"One wonders if he left seminal messages with his readers," I said, a little pleased with my pun.

"Yes," he replied, ignoring my sly smile, "I myself once said that my writing was a gob of spit in the face of art. Some writers ooze ingratiatory syrup, some throw short, quick punches, some whine, whimper, shout, shit, throw up —"

"And these are, shall we say, ah, indefensible motives?"

"That's not for me to say. I have no motives at all when I write. It's something I do for my own pleasure. You could say that I am baring my soul to you, that I am flaunting my vulnerability, sharing, giving, all at the same time. I may be *instructing*, too, you know, telling you things you don't know, giving you a part of me that you may find useful one day. A man can live for a very long time and commit a great many sins before he has some kind of re-birth, some awakening, some true awareness of what life is about. But this doesn't seem to happen nearly enough. People don't seem to change very much over the long haul." Mueller's speech was starting to slur, and his eyes closed. He looked dead, parchment-skinned, gray, and yet noble. "Man's relationship with the cosmos," he muttered, "the futurists can see the seedy microcosms and the holy macrocosms both. We can shit in the jubileed cherries and then soar with the angels. We are demons, and we are gods. We are the Eros lifeblood and the Thanos formaldehyde. We write to try to recapture the innocence of childhood, but all we do is poison others with our efforts. Now, what was it I was going to say — oh, yeah — you bundle your sophomoric ass out of here, I've got some screwing to do."

OVER THE NEXT year, I visited with the remaining 297 futurist-savant-writers. Most of them were men, and the few women I talked to were somehow masculine. Brad Raybury was wholesome, Manny Baltzberg was acrid, Kamon Dight was patriarchal, and Carther Larke galactic. B.J. Gallard wove great vistas of visual perspective, W.H. Gells spanned the centuries easily, and Buxley was pharmacologic. Tolvin Loffler had an exponential, journalistic, probe-style, and L.A. Rafferty was delightfully idiosyncratic. L.U. Kaguinn was musty and didactic and Rom Teamy gutsy and elbow-buddy in camaraderie. Morge M.M. Gartin was necrophilic and Michael Mishop tender and poetic. Gavid Derrold was boyishly self-effacing, and O.O. Affutt interminable. Sorman Nimrad was sui generis and meta-lingual, and Beg Grenford was gentlemanly, and credible in his physics-locus. Tame Jiptree Jr. was naughty and gleeful in her geriatricity, and Ped Fohl was a frustrated psychiatrist. Sif Climak was mellowed, yet metallic, and Filip Fose Harmer rode off in 22 delightful azimuths all at once. Hank Ferbert was heavy on glossaries, and Hobert Reinlein turned out to be a walking military academy (naval). Hoe Jaldeman was something of a career mercenary space hero, and Balex Udries the consummate scholar-technician-editor-critic. Stevadore Thurgeon projected beautifully controlled, egocentric poetic licensure, and Dack Jann was kosher. Narry Liven composed lyric sonatas, C.C. Jer-rh smiled confectionary feminine smiles, and Jerica Wong effused a sticky, frog-like sexuality. Lichard Rupoff sailed giant kites through deep space, and Rider Sobinson regaled us with saloon stories. Assaac Isimov was biochemical and collected typewriters like fetishes, and B.F. Musby was also into necrophilia. Com-

modore Thogswell was a five-star general (ret.) in the U.S. Podiatric Corps, as well as president of Mensa (IQ 206), and Damuel R. Selaney was still drawing royalties from the cover art of the paperback of *Dahlgren*. Jake Johns was a billionaire from stories written about the 1700s, and Litz Freiberg was an international expert on craps. Perry Journelle was a Ph.D. And there were a great many others. I interviewed holograms of Hilaire Belloc, Lewis Carroll, G.K. Chesterton, and Dostoevsky. I spent a very long time with the holographic Rider Haggard, and with Knut Hamsun, Herman Hesse, Thomas Mann, and H.L. Mencksen. I was impressed with John Cowper Powys, Marcel Proust, Strindberg, Thoreau, and Whitman. The Marquis de Sade was really a rather pleasant holographic fellow, I thought, and I found Gelix Fotxchalk an interesting amalgam of neologistic crudity and poetic hardware.

So! Fully compended, my book, *Harmless Illusions* will contain 300 stories, and will be bound and marketed in a ten-volume hardback packet (bookcase is the better word, I suppose), and will retail for approximately \$1,875.00. I believe this to be the ultimate in futurist data, and hope to have it published by June of 2080, or perhaps January or May or November of 2081 or 2082-83. And I am now inviting submissions for a sequel, to be titled *The Absolute Very Final Last Harmless Illusions*, and will be paying twenty-two cents a word, on publication.

November 10, 1978

The Municipal Smog-Man

I wonder if sitting so smug in my chair
Has the function of clearing the smog from the air,
For the nitrogen level is falling a bit,
And the particle-ticulates fall into my mitt,

All of poly, and ester, and filters, and weirs.
It surely allays all the citizens' fears
To know that the smog-man is doing his job
Of herding the gas-clouds all into a gob

That he skillfully thrusts in the chrome vaporizer
(so simple to turn into sadder and wiser).
But where does the vaporized smog all go to?
Is it pure and out gaseous, or potty poo-poo?

I start at the crack of the slow-stirring dawn
To making my rounds for the Edison Con;
A monopoly grand for the past hundred years,
Whose health I have toasted with hundreds of beers.

But I bitch a lot too: there are unions and guilds,
And landfills competing with smog control mills.
I can walk just so far in the maze of the town
Before meeting a smog-man of hostile reknown,

Who is bent on the mission of stealing my air,
And banking it into his company's fare
Of assortedly noxious particulate gas
That adds to the cumulate critical mass

Of communal smog-banks, both fatted and lean,
Who are vying for business, with acumen keen,
For the subsidy payments are geared to the fact
That rivals must not be caught up in the act

Of filching a smog-patch of public domain,
Lest, by hook or by crook, they do sneakedly deign
To juggle their quotas and lean on the scales
That objectively quantify quarterly sales.

My smog-bag is reading at three-quarters full,
When an alien smog-man accosts me — I bull
Fair into his thorax, a bare-fighting thrust —
For keeping my company's equity must

Be paramount in my cognitional set.
He is fatty and slow, but a desperate bet
To puncture my smog-bag, and draw off a quaff
Of pressurized ozone, nitrogenous chaff

That translates to pay for my room and my board,
And adds to the food-cubes I try so to hoard,
For life in the city is cheap and is hard,
And a smog-man must never relinquish his guard.

I have flattened him low in the grit of the street,
And inserted my siphon plumb-smack in his beet-
Colored 'ceptacle-baggy, and bearing the name
Of a company famous, but lesser in fame

Than my glorious Edison Con — number one!
And in seconds (my clever skullduggery done),
I sprint for the office and code in my data.
For so early a coup, a delicious potato

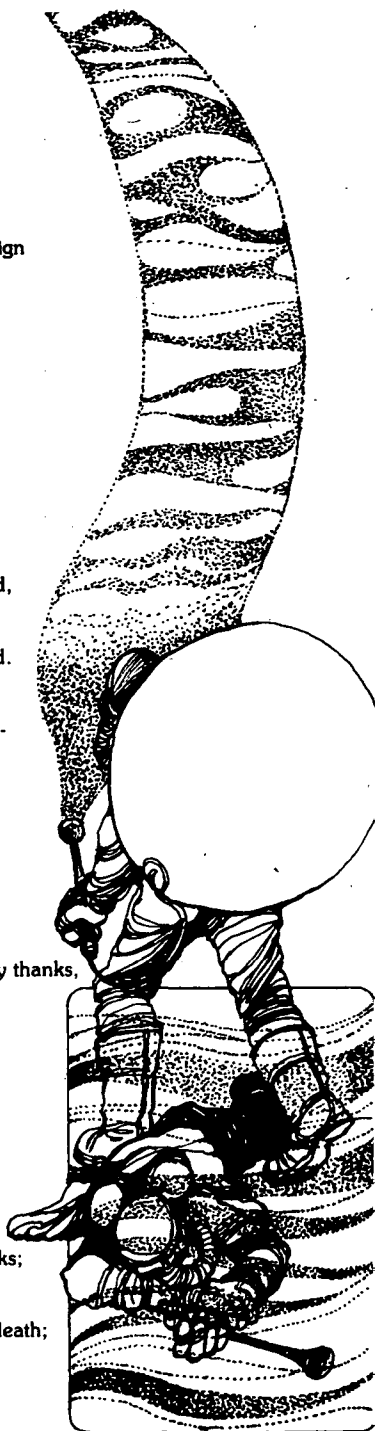
Will be warranted from the foodstuffery banks,
And, for produce(!) fair-fresh, I would give hearty thanks,
Since a season of eating but nodules and cubes
Has withered my pectrals to low sagging boobs.

My quota is filled, I run for my hole.
It is safest and surest to live like a mole
In the breach of a girder, encoffined in steel,
Where I wolf down the marvelous 'tatory meal.

The life of a smog-man is not atall bad.
It hinges on factors both happy and sad.
We live, thanks to face-masks and oxygen tanks,
And code-keys to government smog-control banks;

For the air in the city is unfit for breath,
And the streets are well littered with refuse and death;
And a mask is the singular way to survive
As a smog-man, with hours from eight until five.

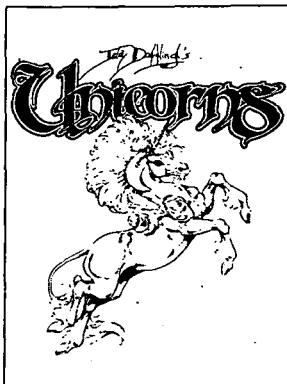
— Felix C. Gotschalk



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When I was six I dreamed that my father was murdered. That I sleepwalked into his workroom in the middle of the night and found him on the floor, bleeding from a gunshot wound in the temple. That at the edge of my vision I had a fleeting glimpse of an intruder but could not identify him. I screamed in my sleep and awoke in my bed, my father bending over me, his face fearful in the dull glow from the hallway.

"You scream all the time in your sleep, Bobby," he said. "You've got to stop it; I can't take it anymore, I can't concentrate on my work." Then he pulled the covers over my head and went away and left me lying there, trembling.

When I was sixteen I wished that the dream of my father's murder had not been a dream at all. And when I was thirty-six I stood over his coffin in the rectory of St. Joseph's, weeping bitter tears because it had taken him three decades more of my life to die.

Every one of the moments of that time had been extracted from me, extracted in pain and guilt, and now he was dead and there was no way to reach him, to make reparation. He died peacefully, it was said; of emphysema, in deep coma in a hospital room. I was summoned by long distance telephone — there were no other relatives, no friends — and I buried him properly, the bitter tears falling along with clumps of sod on that \$700 silk-lined coffin.

A tale of Paradox Lost . . .

on the Barry N. NATURE • Malzberg of TIME Bill Pronzini

It is true that early on my father exerted a great deal of influence over me, that in some ways I was his surrogate. But I did not want it that way. Please understand: I did not want it that way.

My father was a backyard physicist, a tinkerer, an inventor, an engineering school dropout who was a minor civil servant in the United States Patent Office most of his adult life. He had, as all backyard tinkering dropouts do, big plans, big ideas (as I did once, before he bled them out of me). He worked on perpetual motion, on a universal solvent, on a time machine. He read science fiction magazines, he earned a correspondence Doctor of Divine Metaphysics, he wrote letters to the editors of scientific journals (under a pseudonym, so as not to jeopardize his GS-5 rating), railing against the "hypocrisy of organized science." The true big ideas were happening in the cellars and basements of private citizens like himself, he said, but the men with degrees and government contracts were in conspiracy to suppress them. No one listened to him, of course; no one ever listens to Doctors of Divine Metaphysics. They did not even publish his letters.

My mother died early (and in my dreams again, often) and there were only my father and me in the large house his parents had willed him, plus a faceless succession of housekeepers. In the night my father would slam around the basement and speak loudly of his plans to no one at all, in counterpoint to the sounds of metal on metal.

When I was ten . . . no, it must have been eight . . . as soon as I had mastered

the bare tools of literacy, he enlisted me to carry on his life's work. "The two of us, Bobby," he said. "You'll be my disciple; we'll be the father and son, the Dumas *pere et fils* of scientific research." And he showed me blueprints for the universal solvent; explained how the proper time machine would short-circuit temporal paradox; put me to work hammering and cutting and shaping with the tools in his workshop.

I dreamed of him dead, murdered, but he lived on and taught me all that he knew. All that he knew was nothing. I understood very early on (children understand everything very early on; growth is a matter of unlearning), but it is always best to humor tinkerers and divine metaphysicians. A father has terrific power, after all, the son only the cachet of vulnerability. In the nights, while I worked with him, he spoke to me of joints, creaks in time, balls of force that would circumvent the second law of thermodynamics. My sleep, once wrecked by dreams of his murder or my mother's death, perished in these years. We had so many plans. We worked together. We forged the fire.

We did, of course, nothing at all.

In time my father's department at the patent office was subsumed under a larger one and both his duties and his hours changed. Our experiments decreased; my life broadened slightly. I was a brilliant student, a National Merit Scholar; I obtained a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which included room and board, and I enrolled there at the age of seventeen. After which, not once did I set foot in my father's house nor he in any place which I occupied.

I was a brilliant student in college as well, if somewhat antisocial (but then, so were a number of my classmates). I learned to play the bassoon. I had three dates with two girls. I did original research on the temporal question. I graduated with honors, took a graduate degree, assumed more honors, took a doctorate, remained in academia. My career flattened out, it may be said, at the age of twenty-eight; I went to a small midwestern university and became chairman of its three-member Department of Physics. I never married: I could not get past the idea of my dead mother being mounted by my unmurdered father.

My researches into temporal paradox continued. And these researches, to my own amazement, did not fail; three months after my father's death from emphysema, I invented a time machine.

Small experiments with watches and rodents proved that the machine worked. Detector sweeps through hours, weeks, months, years made recoveries; it had effective compass; it could be controlled for time and place. There remained only the supreme test of sending a human being, sending myself (the only true experiment is the one of risk) back into the mists of time.

The question of where I would go and what I would do was no question at all: I would return to a night before I was conceived, a night in the year 1943, and I would murder my father as I had seen him murdered in my dream.

As a student of temporal paradox, I postulated that this would result in my obliteration — a not inelegant way to commit suicide. One must understand the depths of my unhappiness, my self-destructiveness. It is not easy being a failed prodigy, not easy to come from a childhood populated by an unmurdered father and a dead mother.

Thus I made my calculations, set the controls, and found myself, the instant after I had activated the machine, in my father's workshop on the night of February 6, 1943. In my hand was a .38 caliber revolver. My father, hunched over his blueprints, looked up, his mad eyes glinting with strange lights. Quite calmly, before he could speak, I shot him in the temple and watched him fall, all clutter and spectacles, over his workbench.

At that very instant something exceptional happened: the room shimmered and faded and there was a snapping sensation, as of a rubber band releasing. In the time it took me to blink, the workshop stopped shimmering, stopped fading — and was different than it had been moments ago. Subtly different, as if it were not the same workshop at all. Or the same workshop at a different point in time.

Then, to my further astonishment, my six-year-old self burst into the room. I stared at him/me, but he/I seemed only vaguely aware of my presence. I was a fat unlovable child with many facial tics, complicated now by fear and grief. He/I pointed at my father's body. "He's dead!" I/he screamed. After which my six-year-old self rushed out of the workshop, leaving me there alone.

But that was not all. When I looked back at the workbench, my father's corpse had disappeared. My time machine, too.

It was then that I understood the laws of temporality for the first time in all their futility and decency. There is no temporal paradox. What could not happen simply cannot and must not happen. As soon as I had shot my father, Time had snapped me forward a full seven years to the year 1950, the the sixth year of my life, to the night I had dreamed I saw him murdered. And to further seal the apparent rent in its fabric, it had unmurdered my father and made me assume his place; I had ceased to exist at the age of thirty-six so that I could become — truly — my father's surrogate.

Consider my horror as I surmised all of this. Consider it as I was compelled in the next second to rush into the room where my six-year-old self lay weeping under the blankets and say to him, "You scream all the time in your sleep, Bobby. You've got to stop it; I can't take it anymore, I can't concentrate on my work." Consider it as I saw how Time would be served, what I would do to myself in order that I, as my father, could live three more decades and die of emphysema; in order that my six-year-old self could grow up as I had grown up, and invent a time machine, and come back to the year 1943 to murder my father, and be snapped forward into the year 1950... over and over again, the perpetual reenactment.

The message of my story, then, is as simple as it is terrible: you must make no researches into temporal paradox, invent no time machine, plan no temporal crimes. For if you do you will suffer the same fate as I.

To become oneself; to destroy oneself.

To make all deaths one's own. ●

Bill Pronzini

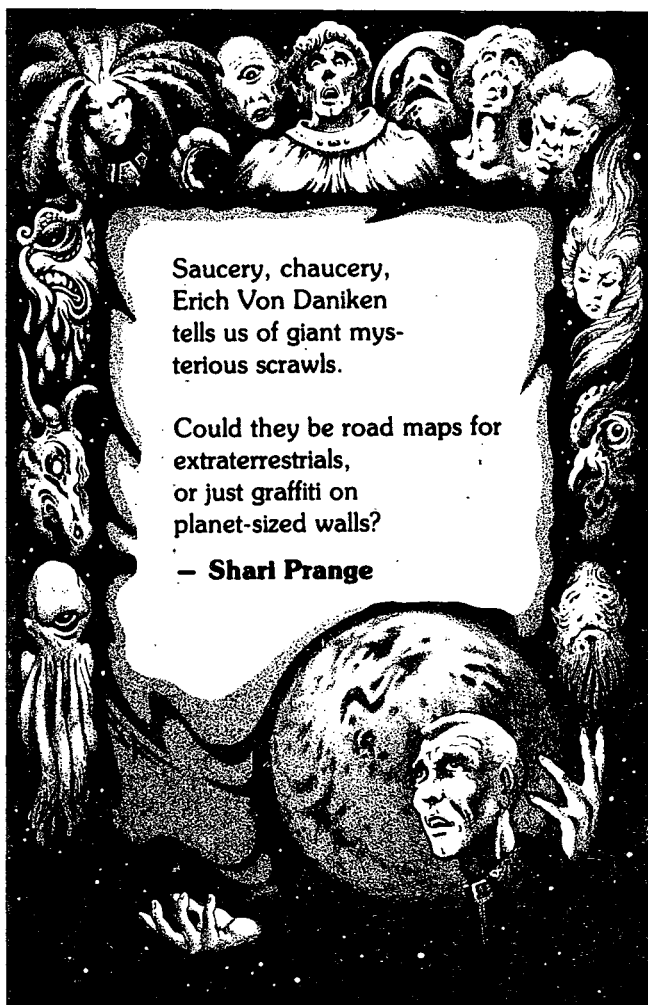
Bill Pronzini (born 1943) made his first professional short-story sale in 1966 and has been a full-time freelance writer since 1969. In collaboration with Barry N. Malzberg, he has published four suspense novels, one sf novel (*Prose Bowl*, St. Martin's Press, 1980), some three dozen sf and mystery short stories, and four sf anthologies (one of which, *Bug-Eyed Monsters*, was a selection of the Quality Paper Book Club). Working alone he has published eighteen suspense novels, 200 pieces of short fiction and nonfiction, a humorous study of mystery fiction called *Gun in Cheek*, and nine mystery and fan-

tasy/horror anthologies (including a successful series of theme collections under such titles as *Werewolf*, *Voodoo!*, and *Creature!*) His work has been translated into a dozen languages, has appeared in 24 countries throughout the world, and has been adapted for radio and television and sold for feature theatrical filming. He collaborated with columnist Jack Anderson on *The Cambodia File*, published by Doubleday early this year.

Barry N. Malzberg

Barry N. Malzberg is the author of twenty-six science fiction novels, eight collections, eight (co-edited) anthologies, *Beyond Apollo* (Random House, 1972) and first winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best sf novel of the year. Other novels include *Galaxies*, *Herovit's World*, *Chorale*, *The Men Inside*, *Underlay*, *In the Enclosure*, *Tactics of Con-*

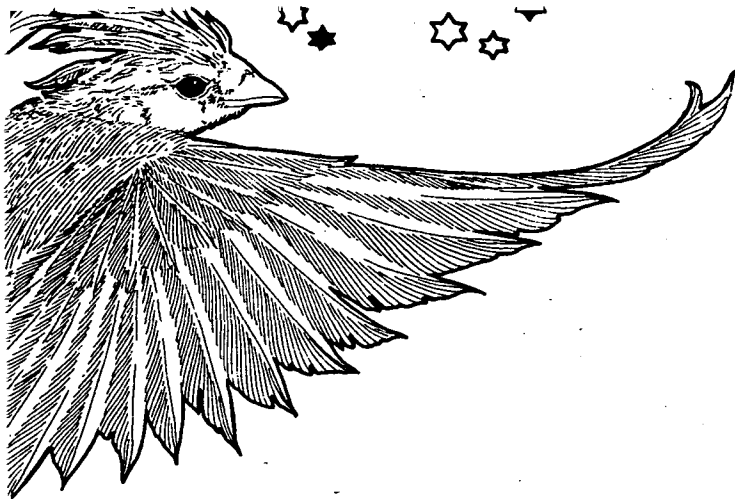
quests. Most recent collections are *Malzberg at Large* (Ace, 1979), *The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady* (Doubleday, 1980). He has had more than 200 science fiction stories in all of the magazines and original anthologies since 1967; also many stories in mystery and men's magazine markets. Former editor (4/68 - 10/68) *Amazing* and *Fantastic*.





Illustrated by Alicia Austin

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A question of Love and Death.

Richard P. Russo **the FIREBIRD** **SUITE**

There is a woman who walks along the edge of a sea on a small world nearly twenty light years from Earth.

She is tall, and supple. Her hair is dark brown, eyes black, her skin deeply tanned. A gossamer gown flows about her and she holds her head high in the beach's light breeze. She appears quite young.

Back away from the water, near the trees that line the coast, is a fire set within a circle of blackened stones. The flames are low and sway with the wind.

There is a flash, a streak, and a vision of crimson wings slices the air. The flames rise from the sand and rocks, hover above them, then drift away towards the water, picking up speed as they cross the dry sand.

They pass the woman and halt before they reach the waves. The flames blossom, grow, and as they grow they coalesce, solidify, and take on the form of...

Wings, full, featherless and smooth, very smooth and soft. They spread across the sands, lifting gently with the changing air currents, balanced and poised.

A tail forms, wide with bright streamers of orange waving in the wind, tensed. It firms, stabilizes, and rests on the sand.

Head beaked and feathered in flame, light wisps of red and orange settle

FIREBIRD SUITE 101

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around the edges, line the eyes. The eyes are black, but they are flat and dull. Dormant.

The Firebird dwarfs the woman who stands watching. She walks away from it, goes to a tiny shack set at the edge of the trees, above the reach of the highest of tides. She steps inside the hut and kneels on a straw mattress. She stares out the window at the flaming wings, and her black eyes sparkle and shine in the early morning sun.

The breeze stops momentarily, as if frozen in mid-movement, and the eyes of the Firebird come to life, become glowing coals, deep spirals of flashing black. They are eyes that burn and speak. Simultaneously, the woman's own eyes glaze over and fade, and she falls back onto the straw, an empty expression on her face. Her lids close, her breathing and pulse slow, become shallow. A strange rose flush of life comes to her face and she is still.

The Firebird screeches and tosses its head, breast swelling as it breathes in deeply of the salty, ocean air. The wind catches the wings and they billow. It moves forward.

The tail drags in the sand, leaving no tracks behind, then lifts and spreads fully as wide as the outstretched wings. Thin membrane in the tail ripples, the figure of flame rises, and clawed legs pull up and fold in next to the underbelly.

The Firebird soars out over the foamy waves, circling and climbing, heading further out to sea with each spiral. It straightens its flight, screeches once again. The wings beat slowly, powerfully, and it accelerates. Within minutes it disappears from sight.

I DO NOT own this world, or this island which is my retreat, only a small strip of beach, and the hut which I built with my own hands. But it is a world with few people, I rarely see anyone, and I always feel alone and isolated. That's why I come here.

I have lived here off and on for the last hundred and twenty-five years. It is my place of recovery, recuperation, rejuvenation. It's here that I heal myself so I can return to people and crowds once again.

In the last two hundred plus years, since I became what I am, my life has been full. It's been exciting, dangerous, intense, ecstatic at times, all shot through with occasional touches of boredom and relaxation. Stories, adventures if you will, to fill several volumes or reels. But without the beginning, without that which made me, there would have been nothing — no stories, no close calls with death. Death would have claimed me long ago.

So this is the story I tell now, a beginning to all, of a woman named Karis, myself, what she became, and what she still is.

THE FLAMES from the small fire danced in orange and red and purple, with occasional touches of blue, or yellow. It crackled, popped, and hissed.

Karis sat cross-legged on the soft carpet, watching the fire, her mind blanked and ignoring the two men behind her. She breathed in, savored the charcoal odor of the burning wood that filled the room.

"All right, Karis," Ainsley broke in. "Go ahead."

Karis breathed out, concentrated on the flames. She thought of the cameras, hidden from sight, but surrounding her. She gripped her knees with tensed hands, and began.

The flames diminished slightly, smoothed at their edges, became almost rounded. Smoke rose, lazy and light. Karis squinted at the flames and her face tightened.

Slowly, the flames lifted from the wood itself, left an inch of clear space beneath them, and burned in the air, isolated, separate from the wood. Thick puffs of smoke floated up from the smoldering wood, passed through the suspended fire. Perspiration broke out on Karis' forehead and upper lip.

The flames rose higher, three, five, then ten inches above the wood. Karis, with her thoughts, brought the flames together into a loose sphere, contracted and rounded the flames still more, formed a compact ball of fire. It hung in the air a few moments, silent and gently turning, then fell apart, the flames disappearing altogether. Karis dropped her head, dripping wet and flushed.

"That was beautiful," Ainsley said. "Simply beautiful." The nameless man with him grunted.

Wonderful, Karis thought. Just tremendous. She shook her head. He thinks it's beautiful. So are a million other things. She lay back on the carpet and closed her eyes, exhausted.

"When you're rested, come on into my office." Ainsley's voice was fading. "All right?"

Karis waved her hand in assent, and drifted off into sleep.

In his office, she watched him as he moved about while sitting in his chair behind a mammoth wooden desk; she knew the desk must be worth a small fortune. Ainsley was a nervous man, or at least he was now. He ran his hand through thinning, grey hair, adjusted his glasses on his long nose.

"Karis, the analyses of the air content in the room before and after you worked with the fire, while hardly conclusive, seem to confirm what was our original hypothesis."

"And that was?"

Ainsley scratched behind his ear. "We think that you are actually rearranging the molecules in the air to form combustible gasses. There's always plenty of oxygen, but we think you're switching the fuel from, say, wood or paper; to a gaseous fuel that you are forming yourself."

Karis almost laughed, only smiled instead. She shook her head.

"That's a . . . wild idea, Ainsley."

"Call me Paul, please. And yes, it's wild, but it appears to be the most logical explanation right now, and it explains the odors given off."

"All right." She shrugged. "Grant that your explanation is basically correct. What I do isn't worth much. I don't really do that much, and can only keep on for a few minutes before becoming virtually exhausted. Might be good for a sideshow act, if there were any more, but that's not exactly my interest in life."

Ainsley shook his head, swiveled his chair and leaned forward to look at her.

"It's not worthless. We'd like to study it, perhaps help you develop it into something more potent that *could* be useful."

"I don't like the idea of being a test animal. I understand there are quite a few people with . . . 'talents' similar to mine, telepaths and the like. You study them, why do you need me? Just to have another?"

"No. You're different. No one does anything with fire, with actual molecular arrangement as far as we know. Besides . . ." He let it hang, as though he were trying to decide how to continue.

Now he'll get down to it, she thought. She'd had a feeling there was more to it. It excited her somewhat.

"Besides what, Ai . . . Paul?"

He looked down at his desk, glanced over at the window, then back at Karis.

"To be quite honest, we'd like to try something on you."

Karis nodded. "A real test animal. I see. What do you want to try?"

"Electrosurgery." He leaned back in his chair, lips pressed tightly together.

"What?"

"Electrosurgery. It's not all that new, just the method we'd use, and what we're using it for." He paused, right eyebrow creased. "You're not the first, there have been others. But, as I'm sure you understand, we have a little trouble finding volunteers."

Karis could feel a change in her, change in reaction to Ainsley's words, but she couldn't identify it. Fear? Anticipation?

"I've never heard of this before."

"I hope not. We've taken a few telepaths, both transmitters and receivers, a telekinetic, a couple others. Through this very specialized process we've been able to release their abilities, expand them. In other words, we've been successful."

She didn't say anything at first, let him wait for a bit. It *did* excite her, that much she recognized. But she was apprehensive. Electrosurgery.

"I take it the surgery is performed on the brain."

"Yes."

"How about explaining it just a little for me." She smiled at him. "Hm? A little? Like, everything about it."

Ainsley smiled back. "I can explain it in somewhat simple terms, but I don't see any point in going into all the technical details. We have all that printed up so you can take it home and look it over."

"All right then, simple terms. The basics."

Ainsley nodded, and Karis noticed his whole attitude seemed to change, as if he was preparing for a lecture. He stood up and began pacing as he talked.

"Now then, some preliminaries. There are two basic kinds of cells that make up the brain. Neurons, which are involved in information processing and in the actual activation of nearly every process and reaction in your body, directly or indirectly. Then there are the glial cells, which for years were thought to have no other function than providing structural support for the neurons. Are you following me so far?"

Karis shrugged. "What's to follow?"

"All right, back to neurons. Most neurons in the brain are inhibitory. That is, when they fire, or are activated, they relay a chemical message to another neuron *not* to fire. In other words, most neurons keep things from happening, prevent other neurons from firing, rather than actually making things occur." He paused, looked at her.

Karis nodded for him to continue. So far she understood it fairly well, some of it was even familiar.

"A few years ago, a man by the name of Lichter was doing research on cat brains. Purely by accident, he found that if the glial cells surrounding inhibitory neurons were electrically stimulated in a certain way, they released a chemical substance into the area immediately adjacent to them. This substance somehow permeates the cell wall of the neuron at the tip of its axon. There, the substance in some way we haven't discovered, reacts with the vesicles containing the inhibitory neural transmitter. Afterwards, when the neuron fires, the neural transmitter released by the vesicles has become excitatory rather than inhibitory." Ainsley breathed out as though out of breath. "I'm sorry, that's very complex, I've left some things out, and I probably didn't explain it well besides. Did you follow any of it?"

Karis thought for a moment. "You change inhibitory neurons into excitatory neurons."

"Yes, that's the essence of it. Now obviously the brain is designed to work with mostly inhibitory neurons, so we have to be extremely careful about changing any of them, only those in the minutely specific areas of the brain you use when employing your 'special ability'. By applying the process, we not only get rid of much of the inhibition of your power, but add excitation to it. There's really no telling how much you'd be able to do."

Karis turned away from Ainsley, looked out the window at open sky. She didn't understand it all, not everything, but enough. It meant a lot of power, possibly. A lot of power. She turned back to Ainsley.

"What happens if you succeed? What happens if you do release this in me? I could become quite powerful, and quite useful. It seems to me there would be a lot I could do."

"Yes, that's true." He said nothing else.

"So I let you do the surgery, and you succeed. Then what?" She paused. "What will you expect of me?"

He nodded, very slowly. "Your services."

"What do you mean by that, and for whom?"

"You would be recruited as an . . . agent, let us say. For the United States. Nothing dirty, no killing, nothing like that. Guaranteed. You'd have final say on whether you would participate in any operation."

Again she let him sit and wait. She watched him closely, his face, his hands, his fingers, tried to detect just what he was feeling. Was he trying to deceive her?

"I want to talk it over with my husband first."

He waved a hand. "Of course. Along with the printed material on the electrosurgical procedure, I'll give you further specifics on what kind of agreement we want with you, and your services. It's all ready for you now, and you can pick it up when you leave."

She stood, looked hard at him.

"Paul?"

"Yes?"

"Is this all on the up-and-up? I'm not being conned in any way, I'm not going to end up being used?"

"I'm telling you the truth. Everything."

She stared at him a long time. She believed him. She turned and walked out.

I DROVE directly home and tried to imagine how Anthony would react. Already I decided I liked the idea. I believed Ainsley was sincere, though I expected there would be problems, trouble with people other than him. But much of the reason I liked the idea was pure curiosity.

I'd first become aware of what "powers" I had when I was twelve or thirteen. I think the onset of puberty, at eleven, was what triggered it. I have no evidence on that, it's just what I believe. But ever since I'd become aware of it, the power fascinated me, and I'd always wanted to do more, to be able to do something besides raise a fire a few inches above wood it had been burning.

As far as serving my country, there was no sense of patriotism involved, if I'm honest about it. It was a sense of obligation — if they would be able to give me the power, I owed them something in return.

Anthony was waiting for me when I arrived. He knew where I'd gone, and why. We'd been married for seven years, and he knew most everything about me.

He fixed dinner, lamb brochettes and curry rice, I remember that still. We talked. I told him everything Ainsley said, but left out all my own thoughts and feel-

ings. I didn't want to cloud it.

Anthony said little, asked a few questions; there was hardly any reaction on his part. After the dishes had been cleaned up we went into the front room and read all the material Ainsley had given me. Some of it neither of us understood completely, but together we got most of it. We were very cold and objective while discussing the facts, but when we finished, everything changed.

Anthony became quieter, his voice softer, and he said even less than before. We talked over coffee, about the effect it would have on our lives, about what I would be involving myself in, about what advantages there could be.

And then we were silent for a long time, watching each other, drinking coffee, and thinking. He finally spoke first.

"What do you want to do, Karis?"

I hesitated before answering, though I knew instantly what I wanted to say, and I don't know why I did. Avoidance?

"I think I want to go through with it."

"You *think*?"

I shook my head. "No, not just think. I *know* I want to do it."

He nodded. "Yes, I believe you do." He rose from the couch and took a few steps. He was standing in shadow at the glass door looking out into the back.

"Anthony, how do you feel about it?"

He turned to face me, and I could barely see the smile on his face, it was just hinting, and there was something very serious about it.

"I think you should do it. Because you really want to. I think you should do it."

And that was it, the decision made. That night, as we lay in bed, we did not make love, but held each other very closely, and I believe we were both afraid that something would change, and our lives would not be the same again.

STARK, HARSH images flashed across her open eyes, black and frightening. She flared her nostrils, smelling the faint odor of electrical burning, and heard the quiet, high-pitched humming of the saw. The soundless incision of the laser knife had not been bad, but this. . . It stopped, and the images washed away, were replaced by Ainsley's face leaning over her.

"How are you doing, Karis?"

She tried to smile; failed, and made a noise in her throat. At least there would be no pain, she thought, no pain. Then she realized her fists were clenched and she was straining against the straps. She relaxed slightly, opened her hands and breathed out.

"Now you see why the restraints are necessary," Ainsley said. "Can't have you moving around on us. Are you ready?"

She croaked out a "Yes," and he smiled. His face disappeared and she could see only ceiling and part of the opposite wall.

The humming picked up again, louder, and she winced as she felt the vibration of the saw on her skull. More pictures flashed — her brain exposed and convulsing, blood spraying, hair flying. All imagination, all of which she knew was not occurring, but her entire body shivered involuntarily, and a feeling of helplessness rose in her stomach and chest. And fear.

She wanted to jump up from the table and dash out of the operating room, anywhere. She wanted to postpone the operation, or cancel it. She wanted to back out, tell Ainsley to find someone else. She wanted to scream. She wanted to vomit.

"Heartbeat increasing again," she heard, off in the distance. As if the voice was in another room, another building.

“Increase the Sodothol, slightly. I want to bring it back down

Karis breathed in, deep and full, and tried to fight down the panic. A surge of wavy warmth flowed into her, soothed her.

Deep breath. . . deep breath. The sound of the saw ceased. The silence was uncomfortable, but better.

She thought she could hear the suction “squish” of the section of her skull being removed, but she knew that wasn’t possible. She closed her eyes, still afraid. Finally, Ainsley’s voice again, close.

“Karis, that part of it’s over. We’re ready to go in. We know the probable area of the brain you use, but as I explained, we’ve got to be precise about it. We’ll go in with the electrodes, and do a little testing. Can you see the fire at the end of the table?”

Her head was propped and tilted at an angle, and if she rolled her eyes down she could just barely see the flames. She tried to nod, remembered her head was immobile, and said, “Yes.”

“All right. When I tell you to, work with it, do something with the flames. It doesn’t have to be a lot, just do something. O.K.?”

“Yes.”

Silence once again. Karis knew they were lowering the electrodes, electrodes that would record the activity of individual neurons, pinpointing those she used when working with fire. For some reason, she remembered something she and Anthony had read, about the first successful recording of the electrical activity in a single neuron. Twentieth Century, the 1940s, she recalled. Hogkin and Huxley, with the axon of a squid neuron. She wondered if her neuron’s were much different than the squid’s, and if that Huxley was any relation to Aldous.

She felt a tingly sensation, then it faded.

“Karis, now.”

She concentrated on the fire, on the flames that did nothing to warm her.

Karis lost all conception of time during the testing. A few seconds of controlling the flames, accompanied by either a distinguishable series of rapid ticks, or a train so fast they sounded like one constant buzz. Then a rest, adjustment of the electrodes, and more testing. A long, long time later, they were finished.

She thought she could feel the electrodes being withdrawn, but decided it was her imagination. Whichever, she felt relief, and the pressure, real or imagined, faded.

Ainsley appeared once more.

“Karis, we’ve got you mapped out now. We’re going to give you a general. My part’s done and I’ll be leaving.”

She creased her eyebrows at him.

“Oh, don’t worry. This just isn’t my field. I’ll be watching on video monitors. A better view, actually.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure. See you a little later.” He walked out of her sight.

Karis closed her eyes as they started moving the clear plastic tubing into her nostrils.

I REMEMBER an odd sensation when I woke, groggy and disoriented. It was almost fear, but it was something quite different. I kept wondering what I would be able to do. I tried returning immediately to sleep, but couldn’t, and the sensation passed, changed from a heavy crushing to a slight fuzz, then disappeared altogether. I never felt it again.

I did not try using my power at first, tried not to even think about it. I wanted to

wait until I had the freedom to explore it without limitations or restrictions. And, I was also a little afraid that the operation had done nothing, that I was no different than before, or, worse, that I'd lost everything. I waited.

I left the hospital after a few days, went home. Anthony and I didn't discuss it, kept on as before. Not that we were consciously avoiding it, just that we felt there was no point in discussing it until later.

Finally Ainsley called. He wanted to bring me out to the Mojave Desert to test my powers. Arrangements had been made, he told me, to fly out in three days to the Naval Ordnance Testing Area where we could be alone, where we would not be bothered, interrupted, or observed.

Later, I asked Anthony if he wanted to come along.

"No, I don't think so." He shook his head and smiled, the same way he had that night when we'd made the decision to go ahead with everything. It was the first time I got the feeling that he wasn't happy with the situation. "Just go and do what you have to do," he said.

I called Ainsley, told him I would be coming alone, and three days later we flew out to California.

THE NAVAL Ordnance Testing Area had been closed down several years before, so they were alone. The air was hot, but it was dry, extremely so, and Karis did not feel bothered by the heat. She stood next to Ainsley, and there were four other men, all nameless to her. They didn't disturb her, or even annoy her. Nameless, they became meaningless as well.

They were surrounded by open, flat land. Karis could see the heat shimmering over the sand. Ahead of them, about five hundred feet away, a small fire burned. Behind them was the truck they'd driven out in.

"I want to be a long ways from the fire so we can find out your control range," Ainsley said.

"Just let me know what you want me to do, and when you want it done."

Ainsley laughed. "Play with it, Karis. As if it were a toy. Do whatever strikes you. That's all I want now, just some idea of the extent of your power. We can do any serious, formal testing later if we want. For now, just play."

She smiled to herself, kept her expression sober. All right, she thought. I'll play.

She wasn't sure exactly what she had to do; she never had been. Always it was more by feel than anything else. No special process of thinking. She guessed it must be the same now.

She watched the fire, focused on it. She held back any control, let it burn freely. She locked onto the flames so she was in contact with them, but still held back and let them be. She allowed the power to build within her, become taut, like a bowstring. The tension grew, between her and the fire. Her body tingled, and she felt as if her skin was being stimulated by thousands of tiny needles.

She held . . .

. . . and held

. . . and held . . .

She let loose.

The force of the explosion rocked her, and the sound hammered her ears. Stunned, she watched the wall of flames rise and roar above the desert, literally hundreds of feet, like an oil well ablaze, magnified several times over.

Oh my God, she thought. Oh my dear God.

She settled herself, hardened, and cut everything. The flames sputtered, faded, and were gone.

She turned to look at Ainsley.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his nose.

"I don't think there's any need for further testing." He shook his head and turned away.

LIFE RETURNED to normal, or as normal as it could be under the circumstances. Over the next twelve years I worked for the United States on seventeen occasions, and I believe I did some good, for the country and for the world. I was actually surprised that they did not try to use me for military purposes; that did come, but not until much later, after all this was over.

My code name was Firebird, and if anyone besides the U.S. Government knew about me, I was unaware of it. Later they knew, just as later the U.S. tried to use me for things I didn't want to be used for, and I ran into some real problems. But that's not a part of this story.

I think it was Anthony who first knew that something was wrong. After all, he could see me far better than I could see myself. I think I knew soon after he did, though, and I think we both knew for several years before anything was said. It was that kind of thing.

The signs are there, you see them, you know something's not quite as it should be. But you don't want to accept it, and you feel maybe, irrationally, that if you don't acknowledge it, perhaps it just will not be, and perhaps it will go away.

But we could only go on for so long. One morning, a Sunday morning, we were lying in bed, both on our backs, the sun coming in through opened curtains and warming the bed. I knew Anthony wanted to say something, so I was silent, waited for him to speak. He finally did.

"Karis?"

"Yes, Anthony."

"You're not growing old."

I hadn't expected him to come right out and say it, expected him to hint around it, mention that I still had no grey hair while he did, or that my face was still smooth and young looking, not even traces of crow's feet at the eyes. I had arguments prepared, how some people don't grey until they're fifty, how some people age more slowly than others. But when he said, "You're not growing old," I knew there was no sense arguing it. He knew, and I knew, and we had to do something.

We didn't, not at first. Neither of us knew what was really happening or why. I called Ainsley, gave him my "symptoms." He wanted me to come by the Center immediately so they could run tests. I was to become the experimental animal again.

No discussion with Anthony. We both knew I had to go, that we had to know what was happening before we could discuss it. He didn't even say good-bye when I left.

I'd not seen Ainsley in the last ten years, only talked to him several times. Since aging was foremost in my mind, he looked so old when I walked into his office. He was sixty-three, and anybody that age is entitled to look old, but I almost felt guilty when I saw him. He said only one thing, used Anthony's exact words, even the inflection was the same. "You're not growing old."

They ran entire batteries of tests on me, both physiological and neurological, took four weeks to run them all. In that time I never heard from Anthony.

EEG, EKG, upper and lower GI, blood tests until I was spotted with holes in my arms, glucose tolerance, head x-rays, radioactive dye and brain scans. Complete metabolic analysis. They even starved me for five days, allowing me only water;

then ran further tests. I just can't remember everything they did, and by the fifth or sixth day I was in such a daze anyway, that I really didn't know what was going on, and just submitted to all the testing, turned everything off until it was all over.

And when it was finished, Ainsley took me to the Center's Executive Lounge on the top floor. We were alone. I sat in one of the chairs, he paced back and forth.

"Do you want anything to drink, Karis?"

"No, thank you. Coffee's the strongest I touch."

"Do you want coffee? There's always a pot or two brewing here." He seemed desperate for something to do, so I nodded though I really didn't care for any then.

He rushed into the adjoining room and returned two minutes later with a mug of coffee and a small serving pot. He gave me the mug, set the pot on a small table nearby. He still didn't sit; I drank from my coffee.

"First thing, Karis, we're not sure of anything. We can only make guesses, educated guesses with good evidence, but we're not certain, I want you to understand that." He stopped his pacing, clasped his hands behind his back and looked at me. "I also don't know whether to be happy for you, or sad for you, ecstatic or depressed. I don't know how you'll take it." He resumed his pacing, slower now.

"Tell me, Paul. Just tell me."

He stopped again, finally sat in a chair directly across from me.

"Karis. We think you're immortal."

Karis drove home from the center in clouds. She blanked her mind and focused all attention on the road as though she were driving through a thick fog and could see only a few feet in front of her.

Anthony was in front of the house when she pulled into the drive. He had a hoe in hand and was weeding around the roses. He looked up at her as she came to a stop, then turned back to his hoe.

Karis got out of the car and walked over to him.

"Anthony, I think we'd better talk."

He said nothing, continued to work at the dirt. Karis saw there were no more weeds, he just kept hoeing at clean ground.

"Anthony, I said we'd better talk."

He stopped; nodded.

"Not here, Karis."

"Where then?"

"At the beach."

She started to say something, to ask him why, but decided against it.

"All right, Anthony. The beach."

They got in the car.

Karis drove; Anthony sat motionless beside her. It was an hour's drive. When they arrived, the air was cold, the sky overcast. There was only empty, open sand. They took sweaters from the trunk and put them on, then walked down to the beach.

They stood silent for a few moments, watching the waves roll in white and churning. Stick-leg birds skittered up and down the wet slope, playing tag with the water. Gulls flew by overhead, drifting on the currents.

"Anthony, did you know I could make a Firebird? Like my code name." He didn't respond. "Do you want to see it?"

He shrugged.

She took matches from her pants pocket; she always carried them with her. She struck one and took control of the flame, released it from the match. She moved the flame away from them, increased its size, forced it to grow as she formed it into the shape of a large bird with black eyes like dormant coals.

"I can transfer myself, my thoughts, from my own body into that bird of fire," she said.

He turned to face her, a confused look on his face.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am. I've never told you, never told anyone I could do it, not even Ainsley."

"Don't do it, not now."

"I won't." She turned her attention back to the Firebird and let it burn itself out. They returned to silence.

"What did he say, Karis?"

She thought of everything she'd prepared, all the words she'd gone over in her head. She couldn't use any of it.

"He thinks I'm immortal, Anthony." She half laughed. "Not immortal in the sense that I couldn't be killed. I can. A bullet, a knife, both would kill me just like anyone else."

"But you won't grow old." He paused. "You'll be young forever."

"Well, they're not sure, Anthony." She looked at him, saw an expression on his face that she couldn't identify, but that frightened her. "But yes, probably. They think my mind is unconsciously doing its own molecular rearrangement throughout my body. My body cells apparently have no limitations on reproduction, they can reproduce more than fifty-two times like everyone else's."

"He says, Ainsley says that I could probably age myself."

"Age yourself?"

"Yes, by studying pictures of what I should be like at a certain age, I could probably will myself to look that way, my body to age."

Anthony seemed to explode. He grabbed her by the shoulders and stared into her face, his eyes wild.

"You must, then Karis! You must!"

"Why, Anthony? Tell me why."

"Because I couldn't live with you otherwise. Don't you understand, I'm growing old and I couldn't stand to watch myself grow old while you stayed young. I . . . I just wouldn't be able to live with that!"

"But Anthony, Ainsley thinks that if I started aging myself it probably wouldn't be reversible."

"And so?"

"Anthony, you're talking about giving up a chance at immortality, or maybe living several hundred years."

"You don't understand, Karis. I couldn't live with you that way, knowing, and watching. Besides, you've read those stories about immortals, how they want to die, they get so tired of living on and on."

"Anthony, they're stories written by people who aren't immortal. Nobody knows what it's really like. How can I pass up the chance to find out?"

He finally released her shoulders, stepped back. His face relaxed, and he seemed calmer.

"Don't you love me, Karis?"

"Yes, I do, Anthony."

"And I love you."

"I know that."

"And you know that I will not be able to live with you if you don't age."

"Yes, I know that too."

He sighed. "Then, Karis, isn't our love more important than a chance at immortality?"

She didn't answer him. How could she? How could she hurt him when she loved him? But she knew she had to.

"Karis, before you answer. . . ." He hesitated before continuing. He seemed to her a desperate man, and perhaps he was. "Karis, I want you to think about everything. I won't live with you if you don't age. I can't. I won't want to see you again, ever. Now please, think about it."

Before she could stop him, he turned away and walked down the beach. She let him go, let him have some more time. She'd already done all the thinking, had already decided because she knew before how he would feel, had known he would give her an ultimatum.

She watched him walk along the sand, his back to her, and she wanted to cry. She loved him, and it would be hard for her, very hard, but there was really no question of what she would do. How could there be?

She started after him, then stopped. There was no point in saying good-bye. He'd be able to get back home all right, and when he did she would be gone, would have packed all her things, everything she could take in the car, and would have left.

She turned away from him, the tears starting already, and walked back to the car, leaving him alone on the beach.

I LEFT HIM.

I don't regret it, though I still feel sad sometimes, when I think about it. But I've left others since him, for the same reasons, and I've never regretted any of it. The sad times must come with the good. It's hard on me, when I have to leave someone I love. That's why I come here, to be alone, and to decide if I still want to continue living.

Two hundred thirty-four years I've lived now, and I am not tired yet. I enjoy life, and I am still young in many ways, not only in appearance. Sometimes I think it's time to end my life, or to begin aging myself and grow to be old. But I always decide against it.

Some people think that love is more important than immortality, or at least think it should have been for me. It's not, and how can I explain it. Only someone who actually has that choice to make, has the opportunity to live on for hundreds of years without growing old, only that person can truly understand. Anthony could not understand, and I did not expect him to. I still miss him, him most of all. But I would do it again.

So I live on, and come here when I must. And each time I come here, I decide to go on, and I believe my decision will always be the same.

SHE STEPS out from the shack and breathes in the early morning air. The sun has risen just moments before, and the beach breezes are still cool; the cold doesn't seem to bother her, even dressed in her thin gown.

Barefoot, she makes her way through the dry, sinking sand and down to the water's edge. In the wet sand, each footstep quakes the water and vibrates the sparkles of sunlight. She laughs quietly and skips out into the shallows. Tiny waves break over her knees.

She turns, faces the trees, and stands perfectly still, head held high. Soon, the flames appear, a few at a time; then more, until a large ball has formed over the

dry sand in front of her. The flames grow.

Slowly, deliberately, it molds and takes on the form of the Firebird. Wings and tail flap in the breeze. The eyes are black and lifeless.

The woman smiles. The Firebird spreads its wings, lifts from the ground. It glides out over the waves, past the woman. She turns to follow its flight.

The Firebird rises steadily, climbing in ever widening spirals. The woman tosses her head, laughing, and her hair whips in the wind. The Firebird climbs.

The woman walks out of the water, up the damp slope, and sits on the sand, watching.

The Firebird stops in mid air and hangs. The bright orange and crimson wave, but the Firebird, beak open, hovers motionless.

The eyes come to life, blazing. The woman falls back, lies on the sand, still smiling.

The Firebird dives.

The air whistles and screams around it, and it plummets towards the ocean, far out to sea. It screeches, the wings fold back, and the beak strains forward.

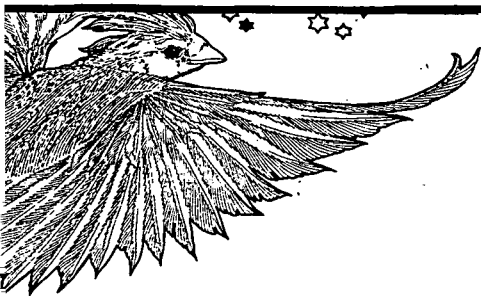
The Firebird plunges faster and faster, nearing the water, the eyes still glowing. The pitch of the whistling rises until it is no more than a few feet above the water.

The eyes glaze over, life leaving, and the Firebird strikes the water.

The ocean hisses; steam floats up and the water boils and bubbles. Then, all is quiet, empty.

The woman, smile gone from her face, rises to her feet. She strolls along the beach, her long gown flapping about her. She stops, bends down and picks up a shell. She stares at it, puts it to her ear, then tosses it gently into the foaming waves.

Another soft breeze blows by her. With one last look out into the ocean, she turns and walks slowly back to the hut by the trees. ●



Richard P. Russo

Unlike many writers, I have not been writing most of my life. I began only a few years ago when, about three in the morning one day, I wrote a very short story on napkins in a Sambo's restaurant. Since that time I have had five stories published, and a sixth soon to appear in print. They are all mainstream stories, published only in literary magazines, so this is my first Science Fiction sale. I write plays as well as stories, and am currently at work on my first novel. I have also won three literary awards.

I earned my B.A. in Psychology from

San Jose State a number of years ago. After a break from school I did a little graduate work in English. After another break, I went back again and am currently in the Master's program in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.

During the past few years I have supported myself, not with my writing, but with student loans and various jobs. I have worked as a Nursery School teacher's aide, an hydraulic press mold operator, a toy store cashier, a gardner, and a professional notetaker at a University, among other jobs.

AL SARRANTONIO

A Desert Stone

Blessed is the Freak,
for he shall inherit the Earth.

Please make a circle around the stone, and be quiet. In a moment I will begin to read. Those of you who are able to sit may do so if you wish; the rest of you, be comfortable in your own ways. Don't lean against the cacti, though. Make notes if you wish, but please, no photographs. Tape recordings of my narration are allowed, and those of you with machines may turn them on now.

I will now begin to read.

Please don't misunderstand me. No creative impulse drives me to tell my story; neither do I scratch this rock with my shaken, feeble beak out of any bloated sense of self-importance. I speak because I must. The doubts and questions which have simmered within me these past days now bubble sloppily to the surface and overflow. I scribble upon this rock that I might state what I have learned from that Event which has recently affected me so; the Event of which I will shortly speak; an Event both startling and intrusive, consuming of all my intellectual energies; a transforming Event demanding attention and hard reflection; an Event of such traumatic import that it has forced me from my usual state of quiet inner thought and meticulous calculation to the point where I now bend, pecking painfully at this flat and inviolable stone, pouring my heart out to the desert. O Muse! Help me to achieve — not greatness, but lucidity. That I might leave this lesson!

I am, of course, a chicken. In general physical terms I resemble any of that breed of strutting female; I do, though, possess individual traits. My neck is somewhat long and I am particularly proud of my beak (the pain it causes me to write this account!), which is frail and gracefully aquiline. I am also a bit thinner and dirtier of feather than most chickens — a condition concurrent with my way of life — my constant exposure to sun, dust and sand, the basic elements of the desert.

(I speak of the desert. I have traveled through the desert my whole life; the desert holds all I know. The totality of my experience lies in the bleached sand, the dry, dusty brush, the stolid cactus, the mushroom. I know nothing outside the bounds of my powdery wandering place: my Universe is wrapped in sand.)

Until that Event of which I will speak, I had always considered myself of sound, unswerving mind; a stable creature of solid principal and logical bent, calm, reasonable, able to think my way through any puzzle and virtually incapable of being surprised by the world around me. All problems were faced with cool, detached rationalism, all mysteries deciphered with measured deduction. I knew my world and myself; all riddles had been solved. O folly! How that Event has

changed my being! I remember it well. . .

That day the sun was high. I was strutting along at my usual pace, my soiled breast thrust out proudly, my wings smooth against my sides, my neck and head undulating to the rhythm of my inner confidence. The desert was warm, but not overly so; the sky was dusty blue and high, with wisps of clouds like pulled cotton. I was at peace with the world, with life, my existence; I was looking at the heights of the heavens when the claws of my toes scratched something: a surface hard and even.

I looked down and jumped quickly back with a small cry of alarm. But instantly I composed myself, preparing to bring the full weight of my perceptual and analytical faculties to bear on what lay before me.

I had stepped onto something black and flat, twenty or thirty feet across and of infinite length; a dark ribbon which blocked my path and cut the desert from horizon to horizon before me. The desert continued beyond it; a white stripe ran down the center of it, along its length.

I stepped back and studied the phenomenon from what I considered a reasonable distance. My first impulse was to regard this marvel with caution: after all, might not this black tape prove to be some sort of sentient creature — possibly even a carnivore with chicken-eating capabilities? That it had shown no outward signs of movement when stepped upon meant nothing; many desert beasts are adept at feigning death or incapacitation. It had not felt alive under my claws but this again meant nothing: many desert dwellers possess rather hard and inanimate-looking exteriors. Only its apparent thinness and extreme length (could there be such a creature that stretched from one end of the world to the other?) moved me toward the tentative conclusion that this anomaly was an inanimate thing. But still, the possibility of that long and dark mass rising up like some gross, writhing snake was not one to be dismissed. For the moment I kept my distance.

But if not a living being, what then could this entity be? What purpose could it serve? From my perspective I shielded my eyes with a wing and stared down the length of it in either direction. It cut the world in half. My mind was perplexed. I settled down on the warm sand in a flutter of feathers to think.

My entire life had shown me nothing like this thing. Something had entered my Universe which, according to my experience, should not be there. I had never encountered anything with which to compare it. My most immediate question was: Does it truly exist?

The anomaly must exist, I concluded, because I perceived it. I had touched it with a clawed foot; my eyes perceived its black length and width, its white line; my olfactory nerves were tickled with the faint scent of tar. And though I could detect no sound (if it was, indeed, inanimate no sound would be expected) I concluded that it must, surely, exist. And I was not dreaming: I turned my head and pecked once at my white back (a nip of considerable force, totally out of proportion to one for preening purposes), and found myself squawking for a considerable length of time and at considerable volume. I was awake, surely.

And since this thing did, then, exist, the overriding question became; What to do with it? For what purpose did it exist?

At this point I became truly bold in thought. Here was an entity for which there were no memories, no past experiences, to base judgments and actions on. Cause and effect relationships were unknown. I was dealing in the realm of mystery.

I would, I resolved coldly, solve all mysteries. I would test my intellectual powers on this band of black; the full, massive weight of my critical faculties would

be brought to bear on this problem. A cool thrill went through me. I raised myself on my spindly legs and strutted deliberately to the black edge of the thing.

I pulled a clawed foot up and scratched cautiously at its black surface. The same hard smoothness: a grating sound like sharp rock against rock. I paused, but there was no movement. It was not alive, as I had feared.

At this point my breast swelled with certitude; I was convinced I must discover the secret of this long, black enigma.

I swaggered out onto its dark surface and stood boldly, my feet spread one on either side of the white line. I clucked defiantly; I would stand my ground, I would use the awesome tonnage of my intelligence to lay bare the innermost secrets of its essence. Nothing could dissuade me! This was the high point of my existence: something had invaded my world and I would do battle with its mysteries. I stood proud, inflated, daring the Unknown. I was not beast, I was chicken!

I stood thus for a long while — who knew how long? Hours, weeks may have passed as I dared outright the danger and secrets of this enigma. Time — no, *eternity* — stood silent and still in the face of my courage, my boldness of being. I stood transfixed; conquering!

Suddenly I felt a slight vibration under my claws. My superior mind returned to the world. A sound? I clucked uncertainly. Might this anomaly be alive after all? The mystery was deepening. A greater challenge was being made; new data were being added —

There was a roar behind me; I turned in time to perceive a huge and shining red entity racing toward me with incredible speed on the black strip. I squawked and flapped my wings like a wild, mindless animal. I ran in circles (oh! — how it pains me to admit such weakness!) like some gross, headless creature. I was blind; and terror, that food of mindless things, glutted me. The huge object rushed at me, would crush me; I leapt into the air, a mass of flapping wings and loud screechings, and landed on the other side of the black strip.

I ran off into the desert, hysterical. The object, which had narrowly missed me, did not turn and follow me into the desert; it did, however, with a frightening, shrieking sound, come to a halt on the black strip. I was only able to see this before a sudden faintness, born of terror, overcame me and I dropped to the desert floor.

When I awoke I at first thought with horror that the red entity, which must certainly be alive, had eaten me. I was surely within its body. I was surrounded by red material, cold and hard, and strangely punctuated by areas of clearness (eyes? internal portholes?) through which I could perceive the desert moving past outside. The very fact that I could deduce these things suddenly presented me with the conclusion that I was in a curiously whole condition for one who had been consumed. Perhaps this red object was not organic after all? The inflexibility of its interior seemed to support this conjecture.

I now twisted my head around — I was in a horizontal position — to study the front portion of the object, and was astounded to find my gaze met by that of another creature! I can only describe him by saying he was featherless, and I could only observe his head, which was roughly the size of my own, since the rest of his body was hidden behind a wall composed of red material. When our eyes met he gave a kind of excited cry and proceeded to make a series of unintelligible sounds — not at all like cluckings. I thought at first he was directing them at me but his eyes had now diverted to the side I now discovered, by twisting my head even farther around, that he was directing his comments at another creature like himself positioned alongside. I could see nothing of this new one since he was facing away from me, but I was able to meet his eyes which were reflected from a shiny

object attached to the front of the vehicle. The two of them made excited noises at one another — rather like roosters fighting over a mate — and I felt the red object we were all encased in increase in speed.

I made a few tentative cluckings to see if either of the two creatures in the front were capable of intelligent conversation, but they remained unresponsive and were quite content to babble at each other, serving me only with an occasional glance. The red object moved over miles and miles of desert; we proceeded this way in a sort of timeless interlude for quite some time until suddenly the desert began to change. The sand became thinner, and then disappeared (!); and all at once the whole world was transformed into one made of material like the black strip and the red object (other objects of similar design raced past us and toward us, all around us) and of other materials equally strange. Here was an entire world, separate from the desert, and yet of it, filled with creatures like the two in the red object with me!

We proceeded along a twisting route through and between structures ten times the height of any cactus. There was a curious symmetry about this place which was totally different from that of the desert; there was a squaring off of corners, a hard brightness, that I found at once disconcerting, unnatural and — provocative. I longed to see more — all — and resolved then to turn the full weight of my intelligence upon unlocking all the mysteries of this strange territory. I felt an exhilaration as I never had before!

The red object came to a stop on a black strip in front of a squarish-looking structure, and the two creatures left it through openings which appeared on either side. They disappeared into the square structure, emerging a few moments later with another creature like themselves who, when it saw me, opened its eyes very wide and began to make excited sounds like the ones I'd heard previously. All three of them, I now noted, were about my height or a bit smaller. After a bit of discussion and hesitation, the three of them walked to the back of the red object; they did something to it and an opening appeared at my feet. I made a move to get out and the three of them jumped back nervously. One of them held a gleaming, stick-like object in its hand.

After a bit of awkwardness I managed to disengage myself from the red object, and stood a moment stretching myself and preening. I then turned to the three creatures and clucked, in as reasonable a voice as I could, "Speak!" but they only jumped again. The one with the stick-like object held it out towards me tentatively, and in a somewhat threatening manner. I found myself annoyed at this childishness, but decided to let it pass. The one with the stick seemed to be urging me toward the square building so I strutted in that direction, turning now and again to bat the stick aside when I thought it too close and a threat to my dignity.

We entered the structure, I leading the parade of babblers who stayed some distance behind me, and followed a twisting path of byways (which, though away from sunlight, were lit by a sort of artificial sunlight!) until I entered a small cubicle. I thought the three creatures would naturally follow me in, but when I turned I found that they had shut me up and gone away.

After a time, which I spent in strutting here and there about the cubicle examining the curious sunlight effect and some rather crude drawings on the walls, the area of the room which had been closed reopened and a new creature entered. This one had what I at first thought to be a head made of a material (still featherless) completely different from the other creatures of this type I had seen, but on closer examination I discovered that his real face seemed to be hidden behind some sort of covering. This gave him a somewhat bizarre appearance, since this covering had the look of a caricature of a normal face. I could see his

eyes through the covering; they regarded me with a look I can only call thoughtful and . . . intelligent. Here at last was a creature with whom to converse!

"Good day, good fellow!" I clucked, but received no answer. The creature merely moved closer, with that hard, intent look in his eyes, and — plucked a feather from my breast!

The blow to my dignity was acute. Were all these creatures mad? I flew about the room, squawking in pain and rage. The creature with the strange face retreated to a corner of the room, and I saw that he was in possession of the stick-like object; he proceeded to wave my purloined feather in front of it. This done, he approached me as I stood smoothing my breast and composure, and the placating gesture he made, holding my stolen feather back out to me, showed me that here perhaps was an intelligent being after all who had merely made a social blunder and was quick to see the folly of his actions. I decided to accept the feather back (replacing it in my breast though I knew it was lost forever) and to try once more at communication.

"I accept your apology," I clucked.

There was no answer, but there was at last a recognition that I had spoken. He held his wingless appendage out in a friendly way and nodded.

I nodded back, and before long we had, with my lead, established a crude form of sign language communication. He was even able to learn a few words from me, and, by the time I indicated I was tired, I had taught him to cluck "feather" and "wing" and "beak." I was left alone in the cubicle to rest.

The next morning the "masked" creature arrived early, and we continued our lessons. I established early on that I could not possibly, for reasons of dignity as well as the harshness of speech involved, learn the creature's language; he would therefore learn mine completely, and that compromise clucks would be developed for new concepts and words. By the time three days had passed in this way, we could speak to each other fluently (I even taught him the rudiments of my writing) and I was at last able to understand the import of my arrival in this small desert "town." Or so I thought.

The "professor" (for that is what he called himself) informed me that I was being "kept under wraps" for a very good reason, and that my discovery was a "momentous occasion, for the country and for the world." I clucked humbly when hearing this, but of course realized the truth — the finding of a massive intelligence such as mine could only be a cause for celebration. There seemed to be some hesitation or worry in the professor's voice when he clucked of the way I was to be presented to the public, but I could not garner what that worry could be. He feigned difficulty with the language when I tried to draw him out on the subject, but I noted a strange gleam in his eyes behind the mask. I let the subject pass for the moment. He informed me I was in a place called "Utah."

I stayed "under wraps" in the square structure for the next couple of weeks while preparations were made for my introduction to society. I participated in many tests and exhibitions for the professor and his three fellows, who he called his "boys." I was even able to cluck a few funny stories of the desert to these "boys" at a luncheon they held in my honor. It seemed that no one outside the building was yet aware of my existence.

Thus the time passed, and I learned all I might of this non-desert world.

Finally one day (I must admit I was becoming restless by this time; the tug of the desert, my home, was upon me) the professor informed me that a press conference had been arranged and that I would, at long last, be given to the people of "Utah" — and to the world.

As I strutted from behind a curtain at the start of the press conference there was an audible gasp from the audience and then a flood of light as cameras began furiously taking pictures. I tolerated this patiently, even striking a few interesting and thoughtful poses. When this flurry of activity finally abated I read a short prepared statement welcoming everyone and then began to field questions. The professor, of course, acted as my interpreter through all this since, though I understood English perfectly, I had not chosen to speak it.

The first few questions, predictably (the professor and I had gone over this probability beforehand) were skeptical as to my very existence; the media instantly assumed after its initial shock that I must be merely a man in a chicken costume. When these questions began the professor and I immediately halted the proceedings and presented a few simple proofs, using charts, graphs, and a charming male reporter who was allowed to examine me physically, to prove that I was indeed, a chicken. The questioning then proceeded to more important matters until the professor suddenly moved to the podium and asked me to step aside.

I was a bit ruffled, but did so.

"I did not ask you all here," he began, and I now saw that fierce glow in his eyes behind the mask as he looked out over the assemblage, "to gawk at a giant chicken. On a spring morning in 1953 my brother and I, then in the Army, were marched, along with 300 other men, to an atomic test site not twenty miles from this town. We were told to dig trenches at various distances from ground zero; my brother was in the trench closest to the bomb, only a mile away. I was a bit farther back. When the bomb went off some of us were blown out of our trenches by the shock wave. The blast was a 44-kiloton one, and we were ordered to march over the earth — which was still hot — toward ground zero. We came within 700 yards of it.

"Six weeks later my brother was brought back to the site and ordered to climb down into the crater to prove to an enquiring newsman how safe the site was.

"Many of the men who were at that atomic test are dead now; my brother died twenty years ago. During the blast I was stupid enough to look up out of my trench and take my goggles and face mask off for a moment, and I was eventually left with this."

The professor removed his mask, and I must say that his face did not resemble those of his fellow creatures: I did not understand why he was putting on this exhibition (the whole thing seemed in entirely bad taste to me) and I wondered what part I could possibly have in it. After all, this was supposed to be my day. He went on after a moment, and his voice was very shrill and loud.

"I am dying, my friends, and so are my three fellow victims" — he indicated his "boys" — "who are all products of various experiments or nuclear power plant accidents. There are others like us all over the world. But it wasn't until recently that I came to realize how little this really means, since we're all dying, it seems."

There was a puzzled hush, and then the professor took me by my wing and drew me to the podium.

"This giant, newssfiller-worthy chicken," he shouted, "is giving off enough radiation — you've all been expose to about 100 roentgens — to insure that everyone in this room will be dead in twenty years."

There was a scream, and someone in the back row ran for the door. One of the "boys" moved to stop him, but the professor motioned for him to be let go.

"It makes no difference," he said. "I want the whole world to know. We've had a horror movie come true, my friends, and this intelligent, arrogant, man-sized chicken is heir to the human race. He was mutated by those atomic tests and he'll take over the Earth. I've done a little investigating, and it seems that there are

others like him — giant, intelligent lizards, coyotes, desert rats, snakes — in deserts and underground test chambers all over the Southwest, in the Pacific islands, and all over the world in various atomic test sites. Go tell your story. It's just a matter of time. In two or three weeks the whole of civilization will probably be in flames over trying to destroy these inheritors. It's only a matter of time before they come from deserts and caves everywhere, spreading their innocently carried poison. It can't be stopped."

The professor began to laugh then, and chaos erupted in the room. I must admit that I did not really understand what was happening. But when someone — one of the reporters — suddenly lunged at me with a weapon, the horror of my position became very clear.

These creatures — all of them — hated me! Even the professor, who I had trusted as a colleague and fellow intellectual, had merely used me for his own ends. I didn't understand all this talk about the end of mankind, but it was clear that all of mankind had been turned against me. O folly! If this was the extent of the human mind then I wanted no part of it.

Clucking madly I made my way through the screaming horde of reporters. Most drew back from me in terror, but a few tried to block my path or harm me and I batted them aside. I was shaking with fear and rage when I broke through to the outside.

The red contraption — a "car" as the professor had called it — was parked outside the building and I hurriedly climbed into it. I had watched through the windows of the building many times as it had been driven to and from the structure and had some idea of its workings. I put it into operation and was forced to knock aside a few raving humans as I pulled out onto the road.

I sped through the maze of streets of the town, nearly missing both structures and humans (the entire populace seemed to be in a frenzy by this time) and finally made my way onto the highway. The reappearance of the desert heartened me greatly, and before long I even began to enjoy driving the car along this road (how little time had passed since I thought this two lane, tar-paved highway a possibly sentient, chicken-devouring snake!) and threw back my head, clucking happily.

I drove on in this manner until I spotted a commotion on the roadway up ahead. On coming closer I found the path blocked by a line of dull green trucks. A panic seized me. I brought the car to a screeching halt, and tried to turn it around but my retreat was blocked by another line of vehicles that had pulled onto the road from the desert behind me. I saw soldiers with guns jump out of the trucks, and swerved the car sharply, pulling off the highway onto the desert floor.

I heard a burst of gunfire behind me, and maneuvered the car wildly, trying to avoid a huge cactus which appeared in my path. I was unable to do so. The automobile struck the cactus, and I was thrown clear. I heard the roar of government jeeps as they rushed toward me. I pushed myself up with my wings and ran off into the desert; in my confusion I found myself running straight for the road! A few soldiers had been left stationed there, and I ran straight at them, clucking and flapping my wings wildly. I startled them and ran by, but one of them gathered himself in time to raise his rifle and fire. A bullet whistled by me and my fright (once again it hurts me to write of my weakness, but I shall) galvanized into shock and I clucked even louder and ran even faster.

I continued to run in a frenzied state for an incalculable period of time, until I realized that I was no longer being pursued. I slowed to a gasping, shocked stumble and, in shock, I strutted blindly through the desert. Days passed. I was a trembling ball of feathers and confusion; I bumped painfully into cacti; occasionally I fell down. I grovelled in sand, and my beak (O beautiful, acquiline member!)

became cracked and dry. I went without food or water. My mind reeled with fever, with the horror of what had happened to me. Thus I groped along.

Finally, some sort of rationality returned to me; the fever faded into a morass of tangled thoughts and questions. Something had occurred, some great Event had occurred, and my mind was stuffed with questions and doubts. What did it all mean? Exhausted and overwhelmed by intellectual chaos, I fell to the sands and wept. All was dark.

When I awoke the sun was out; I could feel its warmth spread through me. My mind was clear and sharp. I raised myself up and found that I was in a little garden of desert plants: a ring of cacti surrounded me. A low, flat rock lay at my feet. I looked down at that rock and suddenly I was filled with wisdom.

All at once I understood that Event!

And that is why I peck so assiduously upon this stone: that my thoughts and experiences might be useful to others; that I might leave a record of my acquired understanding; that a credo of sorts may be formed. The world is a place of wonder; never again will I travel through it a haughty and lonely being. There are others of my kind, as the professor said, and I must seek them out that we might take the gauntlet which has been held out to us. Was I created so that I and my own might inherit the Earth from these mad humans? If so, so be it. I am humble now.

In the distance, on the desert horizon, there is a brightness and I see the mushroom. Others like me, I know, Inheritors of Earth, see it, and it strengthens me.

Please turn your tape recorders off; if you would like to stretch and preen for a moment, you may do so. When we return to the bus back to Salt Lake we may have a general discussion if you wish, and I will answer any questions you have. But please, no talking here.

We shall now offer a moment of silence.

You, there; please don't peck the cacti.

Al Sarrantonio

Have sold to *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, *Heavy Metal*, *Shadows*, edited by Charles L. Grant, *Chrysalis*, edited by Roy Torgeson.

Actually, my first published piece was an article on UFOs which Ray Palmer used in his *Flying Saucers* magazine; I was, I think, 16 or 17 years old and at that time Palmer was publishing just about anything that came along, without payment, even in copies.

Was born in 1952, year of the great flying saucer flap over Washington D.C.; grew up on Long Island.

Attended the Clarion SF Writer's Workshop at Michigan State University in 1974; promptly went into a two-year

writer's block after that but started writing again in 1976; sold my first story in 1977 and have sold exponentially since.

Currently live in the North Bronx, NY, and am assistant to the science fiction editor at a large NY publishing house.



Sound as a • L.A.P. Dollar Moore

Homer was not a happy man. Every night, the news told him that his dollars were worth less. Every day, prices got worse.

"The problem is quite simple," he explained to his wife. "There are too many dollars. If there were fewer dollars; they would be worth more."

"But, Homer, there's nothing we can do about that. Even if we burned all our dollars, we don't have enough to make any difference."

"That's true, Love." Homer went back to his lab, and stayed late.

Morgan DuGetty Rockchild had known about the decision to devalue the dollar, because he was one of the people who had made the decision, after his European, African, South American, Asian, and Australian corporations had shifted the bulk of his conglomerate's wealth into gold. The plan was to buy cheap dollars, then sit back and let the rising dollar increase his wealth. He'd almost bought dollars when they reached the agreed-upon bottom, but some sense made him wait one more day. The dollar went lower. The next day it went lower again. Somebody was messing with The Plan. It was common practice to play with nations and religions and cultures, but money was sacred. Somebody was in very big trouble.

"There are two ways to solve this, Love. One is to have all the people who don't have enough money for a decent living, stop believing that today's money is worth anything. Then it *wouldn't* be. We could start over with something of value that isn't concentrated in the hands of just a few. That, of course, won't work. The other is to get rid of the surplus wealth held by the rich, so that what the rest of us have will be worth more."

"I don't know, Homer. Rich people take, they don't give. Like that international money fund that bought the government of Zaire. They'll get all their money back, and then a lot more. What you need is a Money Monster. You know, like the Cookie Monster on TV?"

"That's true, Love." Homer went back to his lab.

Abdul Sheik ben David hadn't had so much fun since he bought Georgia. The New York Stock Exchange was falling out the bottom, the price of gold was soaring, the dollar was still dropping, and only he and a few friends knew why. Fortunes had been put into the dollar when it hit what was supposed to be the bottom — fortunes which would soon be his. By openly threatening an oil price rise just as the dollar was supposed to recoup, and by secretly dribbling billions of dollars into a dozen different money markets, he'd kept its values falling. Soon would come the final step, and the profits would be astronomical. Already one of the many very rich, he would soon be one of the few very rich. Considering the people who would want to put a large space above his shoulders when they found out, he would have to be very rich indeed to survive.

"Did you know that American currency was printed on a very special kind of paper, Love?"

"According to the news, it's getting less special every day. Is that what you've been working on at the lab? You hardly ever come home anymore. I've missed you."

"I'm sorry, Love, but this can't go on forever. As soon as I finish what I'm working on, we'll go away for a vacation. How would you like to go to Europe?"

"It sounds wonderful, but can we afford it?"

"We can't afford not to." Homer went back to work.

Morgan DuGetty Rockchild was losing money on that portion of his conglomerate's wealth which was still in dollars. The stock market, which he and his friends usually raised or lowered at will, was into him for several billion. The oil price rise had been bought off, but no public announcement had yet been made by the Oil Ministers. He knew that dollars were being dumped on the money markets of New York, London, Brussels, Bonn, and Zurich, forcing the dollar lower every day, but so far he hadn't been able to find out who the terrorists were.

Homer went to the bank and withdrew their life savings, in cash. He took it all to his lab, where he dunked it in a fermenting tank, and then dried it. It looked unchanged.

"New York first, Love, then London, Brussels, Bonn, and Zurich. It's going to be a wonderful vacation."

Abdul Sheik ben David suddenly reversed. Simultaneously, at every major money market around the world, his agents struck. Where there had been no market for dollars the day before, there was now an insatiable market, and investors who had been trying to dump dollars went wild. Billions of dollars changed hands during the first hour, and by day's end that had risen to more than 500 billion. The United States government froze trading in the dollar before the world markets opened the following day, but that was too late. Although such transactions are usually nothing more than computer entries, the Sheik's agents demanded and got the actual dollars, and flew them to a huge and previously unknown vault in the trackless sands of the Rub al Khali. Guarded by the very latest in American-made military systems, which had been bought from U.S. corporations with the help of the Pentagon, the money was safe. Had it been on computers and ledger sheets, the international money magnates might have come up with some way to abort the plot, but with the dollars themselves safely in the vault, there was nothing they could do.

Morgan DuGetty Rockchild was stunned. First, the Arabs had bought every loose dollar in the world, including some of his. Then, the emergency meeting of the Oil Ministers had been held the following day. They did not, as they had been paid to do, announce an oil price freeze. They had announced a twenty percent drop in the price of oil. He had gotten rid of every dollar he could, and now the dollar was skyrocketing. He had bought every ounce of gold he could, and now gold was plummeting. He was ruined — a long way from broke, but ruined. He was not alone.

NATO countries, including the United States, went to Red Alert. The Soviet Union announced that it was an ally of Abdul Sheik ben David's country, and that an attack upon Saudi Arabia would be considered an attack upon Mother Russia herself. The People's Republic of China declared itself on whichever side the USSR wasn't. Ireland said that it would take on the winner.

Far beneath the shifting sands of the Rub al Khali, a dollar bill disintegrated, and the fine dust was blown about by the ventilation system. Homer had taken apart and recombined the DNA of many, many species of fungus before he had come up with his new form. It was food-specific, and would eat only the exact combination of chemicals found in the paper used to print dollars. It was also constantly hungry, and would continue to eat and to multiply so long as its favorite food was available.

Homer was not a happy man. Every night, the news told him of increasing shortages of homes and energy and food. Every day, the pollution of air, soil, and water got worse.

"The problem is quite simple," he explained to his wife. "There are too many people. If there were fewer people..." ●

L.A.P. Moore

L.A.P. Moore has sold articles and short stories to *Cavalier*, *Elite* (Canada), *Big River News*, *The Argonaut*, the U.S. Navy (movie scripts), Murray Publishers (Australia), *Northwoods Journal*, *Animal*

Kingdom, *Cavalier* (International Edition), *Omni*, *Magic Changes*, *Galaxy*, *Short Story International*, *Fantastic* and *Amazing*.

QUANTUM COUPLET

The sex life of a quark,
at best a momentary spark!

— Peter Payack

An Interview with Gene Wolfe

Melissa Mia Hall



Prologue

Boston, the second day of the 1980 World Science Fiction Convention and I'm going to meet Gene Wolfe and interview him. First, I have to make contact. I'm wandering past the cavernous huckster's room with a friend. I glimpse a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, and an amiable air about him, almost childlike, eyes glancing around brightly. I know it's Gene Wolfe although I've never seen him before. I nudge my friend, "Is that Gene Wolfe?" He says he thinks so and I rush forward just as he starts moving away. "Gene! Gene Wolfe!" I yell, knowing I must look frantic. He pauses politely, extends a hand. I introduce myself clumsily and compliment him so profusely that he must think I'm lying or insane.

We meet several times during the convention, mostly for short conversations, enough to get to the point about where the big interview set for Sunday noon will take place, but not enough for me to know who he is. He is still the Man who wrote the currently enfolding Book of the New Sun, Doctor of Death Island and Other Stories and Other Stories and The Book of Gene Wolfe.

When the hour arrives for the session with Gene, I am therefore a little scared, very much excited and tired. Like most convention goers, I stay up too late and consequently appear a bit bedraggled. Gene, on the other hand, although he was up late, too, appears wide awake and ready for anything. We sit down and soon the interview begins in earnest. I begin to know Gene Wolfe — a comfortable sort of man, deliberately thoughtful and wryly humorous, just as much a paradox as one of his stories.

M: You're noted for your elegantly crafted writing and you've been writing for sixteen years. What's the most important thing you've learned about the craft of writing?

G: I think the most important thing I ever learned was that you must write to be read rather than write what gives you pleasure to write. In other words, you should be attempting to create something for a reader, rather than indulging your whims.

M: Religion, spirit, magic, the pursuit of light, the analysis of darkness, all of these pervade your work. Do you consciously set out in search of them? Do you feel like you're a writer with a mission? What comes first, the message or the art?

There is a pause as Gene reflects on this loaded question, his brow appropriately furrowed.

G: The art comes first or the message doesn't come at all. The message comes from me. I am a religious person (Roman Catholic). I am, I suppose, in a very, very minor way, something of a mystic and when you read my material, I think it comes through... I don't believe in writing with a message unless that is what you're paid to do. I think a proper writer with a message is a propagandist or an advertising copywriter. He's paid to write with a message. A supposedly artistic and literary writer has no business writing propaganda.

M: You use a large amount of cultural jumping, for example, Tommy Kirk, Mickey Mouse, etc. in "Three Fingers" — the list is endless. There are constant asides throughout your short stories (Huck Finn, Little Nel, etc.) It's as if you've undertaken a

holy cause to further engrave them upon the minds of your reader. Do you realize that you've been doing this?

G: No, it just happens. I think you would say these things are symbols that have emotional power and a person who is doing literary writing must deal in emotion charged symbols — and so you end up writing about things like death and lions and sacramental meals, perhaps because those are emotional things that wake certain feelings in the deep spring of the individual. I'm using it as I have to, to engage and stir the reader's emotions. And if fiction doesn't do that, then it's failed. That's the purpose of fiction.

M: I've also noticed the rich reservoir of humor you tap into from time to time in your work. How important is humor to you?

G: I don't know. On a schedule of 0-10, it's a probably about a 6. Humor is a wonderful thing. It's very underappreciated. One of the reasons that it is, is that it's no good when it's out of place and it's very frequently out of place.

M: Do you feel that there are major themes latent in your work or is that hogwash? What's more important — the plot, the characters —?

G: Oh, certainly — again, if you want to do deep emotional things, you have to deal with major themes. Some traditionals answer that all writing is about Love and Death, which is a title of a Woody Allen movie. But there's a certain layer of truth in it. There are things that are major for people. Living or dying is very fundamental. Getting love, losing love, those are very fundamental things. Exploring new territory is fundamental. Being imprisoned or breaking out of prison, all those are major themes. Major themes are the proper province of literature.

We both take a breath and relax a little. The outside light pouring in from the large picture window makes his features hard to read. I plunge onwards with an easy question for me but a hard one for Gene.

M: Do you have any favorites among your stories?

He mulls that one for a bit and replies, rubbing his mouth and stretching.

G: Well, I would say my topmost story would be "The Detective of Dreams" in

Dark Forces.

M: I loved it. (An eerie tale concerning dreams and Christ.)

G: That's my own favorite of all my short stories. About one story out of twenty seems to come close to what I really wanted it to be when I started it... Obviously, I may be wrong... "Westwind" is also a favorite. "The Toy Theater" is another.

M: What have been some of the major influences upon your writing?

G: Obviously, some things are more important than others. Probably the earliest influences I had that were of any significance, were the OZ books and the two Alice books which I read as a child. G.K. Chesterton has undoubtedly been a major influence. So has Borges, who was also influenced by Chesterton. So has Dickens... H.G. Wells... Bram Stoker... Mervyn Peake. Modern writers. R.A. Lafferty, Ursula K. Le Guin. Damon Knight has influenced me, not so much as a writer, but as an editor. I think Knight is probably about as good as editors ever get.

M: What are your primary goals?

Gene seems stunned. It's wonderful to watch him truly consider the question before he answers.

G: Wow... WOW. (Another heavy silence). I would like to be a really, really GOOD writer, a fine writer. One of the things that took me a quarter of my life to learn was that the only way to really succeed is to do the thing that you do best. I'm one of those unfortunate kids who were bright enough to be a second rate mathematician. It takes more than bright, it takes a real talent for mathematics, a certain genius. And writing is one thing that I've found I seem to do best. And of course, I enjoy it.

M: Could you talk a bit about how the Torturer series came into being?

Gene sees right through the phrasing of my question and pounces.

G: Oh! My work — everybody always says — what was the idea that led to this story?

M: Right, it's a very common question...

G: I'm not sure now that I can even recall all of the things that came together to

make the Torturer stories. One of them was a certain mystical or pseudo-religious element that I wanted to bring in. I was struck at some point, by the realization that Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross and Jesus had been a carpenter. And a carpenter presumably had built that cross and that although the Gospel tells us that Jesus was a carpenter, he's only described as making one thing. The Gospel tells us one thing that Jesus Himself made. Do you know what it was?

Gene leans forward, waiting for an answer, wagging a finger at a tongue-tied student who's forgotten to do her homework.

M: No.

Gene's voice rises with excitement, he claps his hands and sits back.

G: It was a whip! If you don't believe me, go back and read the New Testament. He made the whip that He used to drive the moneychangers from the temple. And all that stuff struck me in some half-witted way as SIGNIFICANT. At the other end of the scale, at that time I was beginning to be worried about the idea that my work was insufficiently visual. . . I've been tending to be too verbal, too cerebral. . .

As I let this sink in, I slump a little in my chair and realize I'm a lot sleepier than I want to be.

M: Could you give us some hints about *The Claw of the Conciliator*? (An inadvertent yawn slips out that Gene seizes upon merrily.)

G: I warn you, if you nod off during this interview! (We laugh. I sit up straighter.) Well, you know the *Claw of the Conciliator* is the miraculous gem Severian gets stuck with in the first book. . . and it really isn't immediately involved in any strange happenings. There are some things that are ambiguously miraculous in the second book, subject to rational explanations, but the rational explanations are a little difficult to buy. The second book begins with Severian in a village which is fairly close to the gate where the first book ended. He spends a good deal of the book in the House of the Absolute which is the Monarch's palace and then closes with him again on the road to Trax.

M: Why the Doctor Island titles?

G: Well, the first one, as you probably know, was a Nebula nominee. That was the *Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories*

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and it was the only story, as far as I know, that lost to No Award. There were more votes for No Award than there were for that story. It was found afterwards that (this was fairly early in the history of the Nebula) some of the people that voted for No Award were under the impression that that meant they were abstaining in that category, and not voting that No Award be given. . . . So, I was talking to Joe Hensley (who's a good friend of mine who I haven't seen now in years) and he said you ought to write one called *The Death of Doctor Island* because then everyone would say — hey, here's a second shot at it, right? I didn't believe him, but it sounded like such a cute idea that I started thinking about how I could turn the original story around and reverse a lot of the roles and have a different story that was sort of a mirror image of the first one. And I did it and it turned out Joe was right, it did win a Nebula. And then . . . my wife said three's a good number, you know, so you ought to do a third story. . . . So, I wrote *The Doctor of Death Island* and at that point I decided that the business of trying to turn the plot and themes of the original story inside and out again — well — I had come to the end of it.

M: Are you in favor of continuing the Nebula Awards?

G: Yes. Awards reflect their presenters. If SFWA'ans are corrupt, the Nebulas will be corrupt. If fans are, the Hugos will be, too. The value of any award is the value of the giver, which is why decorations bring little respect in the U.S. Armed Forces today.

M: What do you have to say about the state of the art, current literature?

G: The most apparent thing to me in literature, in general — it seems to me that there are no living novelists of towering stature . . . the other really strange thing that has happened quite recently is the near death of poetry. Poetry is mankind's oldest literature to retain popularity with a bulldog grip for about 5000 years and the grip has suddenly slipped. I've spent many hours trying to figure out why and there are some things that seem to have some bearing on the problem, but I'm not sure I really know why. It's very easy to blame things like the schools and television, but I'm not sure those are valid. . . . you know, I'll bet you could go through this hotel and not find a person who could name five major living poets.

Gene stops gloomily, his face a study in reflection and then resolutely brightens.

G: I think that we are entering now, the real Golden Age of Science Fiction and of modern Fantasy. Fantasy is in better shape than it has been since the Middle Ages. Science fiction is in better shape than it has ever been, ever. There are more good writers and what's much more important, than good writers, there are more good readers.

M: You don't feel we've gone past the boom?

G: We're seeing a downward trend now that is part of a general economic cycle. The reader, who say, a couple of years ago would've been willing to spend \$8.95 for a hardcover science fiction book, today has less money and is being asked to spend \$12.95 for the same book. . . . that is the decline, but the decline is not that the person doesn't want to read it. . . . I think that the slump the publishing industry is talking about relates much more to publishing in general than it does to the science fiction genre, in the broad sense.

M: What was your first published story?

G: My first published story was "The Dead Man" which appeared in *Sir* in 1965.

M: What was your first novel?

G: *Operation Ares*. I wrote a short story and sent it to Damon Knight for *Orbit*. Damon, at the time, was acting as an acquisition editor for Berkley Books and he said, "This isn't really a short story but it would be a pretty good first chapter for a novel and I'll get you a contract for a novel, if you want it." And I was green enough that I took it. I say green enough because I wasn't really skillful enough to write a good novel at that time. I don't think *Operation Ares* is a very good novel, but it was my first book. It came out in 1969. That was a book that was sold about three years before it was produced. Those were three long years. . . .

M: Did you have a full-time job at that time?

G: I've had a full-time job all the time. I have a full-time job now.

M: How do you do it?

G: This is my current schedule. . . . it changes, depending on how things are going. I get up at 5:15 a.m., shave, wash my face and by about a quarter to six, I'm in the

basement at the typewriter and I write till about a quarter to eight and then Rosemary has my breakfast ready. I write each morning. But when things get tight, and I'm up against a deadline, I also write in the evening. . . now I'm a technical editor. I was an engineer for 16 years. But I am now a senior editor on the staff of *Plant Engineering* magazine. Basically, my writing experience combined with the engineering degree, too, enabled me to get this job which is, frankly, a good job and a lot of fun.

M: Okay, I wanted to ask about *Peace*, your first mainstream novel and how it evolved. Did it grow organically? Did you plot it carefully?

G: No, because it isn't a plotting book. . . The basic idea is that a man has died and he is haunting his own mind, his own past. This is something very few people seem to understand about *Peace*. If you'll notice the opening line of the book is "The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter, fell last night." And, in the closing chapters of the book, Eleanor Bold comes to him and requests permission to plant an elm on his grave when he dies (she's on a reforestation kick or something) and of course, the old legend is — if there's a tree on a grave, when the tree falls, the falling of the tree releases a ghost on the Earth. In *Peace*, that ghost prowls through his memories throughout the book.

M: Of all your characters, who do you love the most?

G: Boy, that is tough. That is tough. I suppose I would have to say Severian.

Gene is totally absorbed in thinking about Severian and absolutely unprepared for the next question I've been waiting to ask. I launch into it slyly, trying not to grin.

M: When you dream at night, do your characters ever come and talk to you or when your characters dream, do you come and talk to them?

Gene jumps forward, breaking into a wide smile.

G: Oh, aren't you getting fancy! I really wish I had an answer that is equal to that question. In honesty, I have to say no. But what does happen to me, and this is to me very frightening (the first time it happened it scared the pants off of me) — is, I actually meet characters in real life!

M: Oh, no — !

G: I wrote a book one time that's never been published. In it, I had a girl who was kind of a liar and a tramp, but she was also sympathetic in a number of respects. . . and I was driving my car and looked up in the rearview mirror and she was driving the car behind me, exactly as I had visualized her — EXACTLY — and that was scary and the same thing happened on a couple of other instances. I will look around and there is that character. . . talking, breathing. Really, to strip this of any supernatural pretensions, which I don't think it deserves, what I think this really means is that I have the ability to envision characters who are sufficiently realistic that people like that can actually exist.

M: You haven't met Severian yet?

G: No, no, I have not. That would be frightening. Severian — you see him in the book from the inside, but the people in the book see him as a rather grim and frightening figure. Toward the end of the book, Dorcas wakes up with Severian bending over her (*Shadow of the Torturer*) and he's been eating pomegranates so his lips and chin are stained with the red juice. She gets quite a start out of it. There are other tip-offs in the book as well. He is a large man physically. He is hatchet-faced with piercing eyes. Rather inexpressive and although he is a very decent individual by his own lights, he really isn't very bothered by other people's pain and suffering. And he isn't really very bothered by his own. . . pain has been a part of his life, all of his life. . .

When Gene finishes I find that I've almost been hypnotized. It's difficult to remember what my next question is, I'm still full of thoughts concerning the mysterious Severian.

M: He's almost a trance-like character, like he's walking in a waking dream. Okay, your contribution to raising the level of sf and fantasy incalculable. A yawn escapes before I can hide it. Who do you feel is doing exciting, innovative work in that field?

Gene almost jumps out of his chair acting dramatic, points a finger at me.

G: You're dropping off again, Melissa!

He laughs and laughs, repeating, "Yes, you are!" several times to my hopeless protestations. Finally he concedes to sit back and reply.

G: Ursula K. Le Guin, absolutely. R.A. Lafferty has been doing it for years now and has not gotten anything like the recognition he deserves. . . . If I had to pick the most underrated writer in sf, I think Ron Goulart would be the one. New writers? Somtow Sucharitkul.

M: Did you know that there is now a field called Gene Wolfe fiction and that no one but Gene Wolfe can write it? How would you describe the fiction of Gene Wolfe?

G: This is something that I got from Harlan Ellison, who, all kidding aside (and nobody kids Harlan more than I, believe me) who is first of all, a fine person and is secondly, a fine writer — I heard Harlan say one time, and as soon as he said it, realized it was absolutely true, that every writer who's worth a damn has a unique product. . . . I don't think there's anybody else who writes Gene Wolfe stories or Ursula K. Le Guin stories. . . . people always tend to say that old so-and-so is another — and then they name some famous writer. H.G. Wells, in the latter half of his career, was called the second Dickens. There never will be a second of any writer that's really worth a damn.

M: That's right. Your next books are. . .

G: The third volume of the *Book of The New Sun* is *The Sword of The Lictor*. The fourth volume is *Citadel of The Autarch*. You see, before I marketed *Shadow of The Torturer*, I had all four volumes in second draft because I didn't want to get in a situation where the first volume was set and then I couldn't make changes to make the series end the way that I thought it should end and so I went through two drafts on all the books. This kind of thing is the great advantage of writing on the side as opposed to writing for a living.

M: And you'd describe yourself as a part-time writer (*I want to get this down; to memorize it for posterity*).

G: I am a part-time writer.

M: Astounding.

G: I'm holding a full-time job. I work forty hours a week, sometimes more.

M: Well, that makes me feel a lot better.

Capsule Biography:

Gene Wolfe was born in Brooklyn in 1931. His ancestry includes kin of Dutch and Swiss descent. His family lived in a number of places, eventually leading to Texas where Gene grew up. He went to Lamar High School in Houston, was a member of the Junior Texas National Guard. Calling himself "basically a spoiled officer," he ended up at Texas A & M where he did some very heavy drinking and carousing around, finally dropping out which got him drafted for the Korean War. He served in the infantry during the closing four or five months of the fighting. When he got out, a changed man, he attended the University of Houston and took a degree in Mechanical Engineering. While at the University, Gene fell in love with Rosemary Dietsch, a girl he had once lived next door to. Rosemary just happened to be passing through Houston. In two years they were married. Gene and Rosemary have four children, Roy, Madeleine, Therese and Matthew. They currently live in Barrington, Illinois where Gene masquerades as an ordinary character out of one of his stories.

FICTION (Novels and Collections)

Operation Ares, Berkeley 1969

The Fifth Head of Cerberus, Scribners 1972

Peace, Harper and Row 1975

The Devil In a Forest, Follett 1976

The Shadow of The Torturer, Simon and Schuster 1980

The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories, Pocket Books, 1980

The Claw of The Conciliator, Simon and Schuster 1981

The Book of Gene Wolfe, Doubleday 1981

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